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ABSTRACT

This study examined the experiences of disabled students at a variety of Scottish universities and colleges. The study was intended to provide insight into what it is like to be a student with additional needs, and to develop a list of key issues for policymakers. In the first phase of the study conducted in the summer of 1996, a preliminary survey of disability coordinators at these institutions sought information on the institutional definition of "disabled students," enrollment numbers of disabled students, provisions for catering to disabled students, and monitoring systems used by the institutions. In the second phase, 12 disabled students were interviewed about their lives, experiences, and aspirations; there was also an observational "shadowing" of the students through a typical week. Following a brief introduction, the report sections describe the students; the students' lives prior to enrollment; their experiences while attending their respective institutions; how students relate to their institution and its policies; obstacles encountered on the campus; the types of support available to students; students' social life and nonacademic accommodation; (8) students' views of their employment futures; the views of institutional staff; and the conclusions reached by researchers. Appendices include the coordinator questionnaire, notes on the "shadowing" method, and a list of participating students. (MAB)

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Students First

The Experiences of Disabled Students in Higher Education

John Hall
Teresa Tinklin

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John Hall
Teresa Tinklin

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SCRE
The Scottish Council for Research in Education

SCRE Research Report No 85

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Throughout the life of the project the research team were given valuable support and guidance from an advisory committee which was specifically formed for the purpose. This committee included representatives from higher education, SHEFC and the SOEID and, crucially from our point of view, the national co-ordinator who had been appointed under the SHEFC staffing initiative, and a member of the Stirling evaluation team, with whom we maintained a close and valuable liaison.

Within SCRE particular thanks are due to Kay Young for her secretarial and administrative support to the project, and her expertise in helping to prepare this report.

Acronyms and abbreviations

BSc	Bachelor of Science
CP	Cerebral palsy
CV	Curriculum vitae
DSA	Disabled students allowance
FE	Further education
GP	General practitioner
HE	Higher education
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
HNC	Higher National Certificate
HND	Higher National Diploma
IT	Information Technology
MBA	Master of Business Administration
ME	Myalgic encephalomyelitis
MP	Member of Parliament
RAF	Royal Air Force
RNIB	Royal National Institute for the Blind
SAAS	Student Awards Agency for Scotland
SCRE	Scottish Council for Research in Education
SHEFC	Scottish Higher Education Funding Council
SOEID	Scottish Office Education and Industry Department
SRC	Students representative council
SWAP	Scottish Wider Access Programme
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
USA	United States of America
VI	Visually impaired

Main findings

1. Higher education institutions now have institutional policies on students with disabilities.
2. Institutional policies on disability can sometimes conflict with other policies, such as anonymous marking or health and safety requirements.
3. The ways in which policy implementation was monitored varied greatly between institutions.
4. Various forms of advice, guidance and support are now available to students with disabilities, but more could be done to make people aware of this.
5. Recent initiatives have had a positive impact on the development of provision for students with disabilities.
6. The contribution made by the disability co-ordinators was praised by the students.
7. The present rules governing eligibility for the DSA disallow students who are only able to study part-time.
8. There is still a great deal of uncertainty about disclosing disabilities in certain circumstances.
9. Students' academic experiences varied greatly between institutions and departments
10. Institutions could do more to raise awareness of disability issues amongst their staff and students.
11. Students with disabilities are only looking for equal opportunities.
12. Institutions have found ways of adapting the physical environment to improve access, but this is still sometimes less than ideal.
13. Non-academic aspects of life in higher education are also important in ensuring that students are successful.

Each of these points is discussed fully in Chapter 11.

1: Introduction

'At least for the moment we have a lot of good facilities, and we don't need to be constantly raising awareness, although we should, that's part of what we want to do, we want to be more social and make people realise that disabled people ... can enjoy themselves as much as anybody else.'

'... I wouldn't say that they respond positively every time, but they don't respond negatively. I've got a reputation that precedes me: 'Look, you don't say no to her on disability issues'. Because if they do, if they start being difficult, I'll start pulling in the big-wigs to support me.'

'I try to say to myself 'Don't bother what other people think', but that's easier said than done. I can think it, but I don't feel it.'

These quotations are all from students in Scottish higher education institutions. One of them has cerebral palsy, another has a visual impairment and the third is speech-deaf. This document has one principal aim: to report their views, and those of nine of their peers, on what it is like to be a student with a disability in Scottish higher education. This is a vast and complex topic which raises questions about higher education provision, equality of access, the definitions of 'disability', the terminology used to discuss it, and the responses which are, or should be, made. It is an area which has had an increasing amount of attention paid to it in recent years. Much of this has been at the institutional or policy-making level.

The work on which this report is based arose from a request from the Scottish Office Education and Industry Department who were interested in the current position of disabled students in higher education. It has also been supported by the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council.

This report is a set of stories about people's experiences, their aims and their aspirations. It tells of the obstacles they have met, the encouragement they have received and their achievements to date. It tries to tell how they got to where they are, what has happened to them, what they have done and where they hope to go in the future. We are not aware of anyone having tried to do this before with such a group of students studying disparate subjects in different institutions. We believe that there is some value in outsiders such as ourselves taking a thorough and systematic view of what they have to say, and placing it in the context of current developments in higher education.

It was clear that there was a great deal of developmental work going on in universities and colleges and that this work was being evaluated and audited in various ways. What was lacking was the students' viewpoint. We hope that this report helps to fill this gap.

Background to the research

Since 1978, when the Warnock Report was published, the emphasis in school education has been to include those with special needs in mainstream classes wherever possible. Warnock was a landmark in promoting equality of opportunity. 'Mainstreaming' is now a feature of policy at national and local levels within compulsory education, and the focus is now turning towards the situation in further and higher education.

There is now a long history of attention being paid to issues of equal opportunities. Much early work in this area concentrated on race and gender issues, but disability has gradually forced its way higher up the agenda. Much of this is the result of the activities of many pressure groups who have worked on behalf of people with disabilities. In higher education a particular mention should be made of Skill: the National Bureau for Students with Disabilities. As a result of the equal opportunities legislation of the last decades, and of the work of the pressure groups, disability has come to be seen as a rights issue.

Initiatives such as the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) have tried to encourage previously under-represented groups to go into further or higher education. While SWAP was primarily aimed at mature students and those lacking traditional academic qualifications, it also identified students with disabilities as a priority group.

The *Further and Higher Education Charter* for Scotland also drew attention to equal opportunities, special needs and provision for students with disabilities. The *Further and Higher Education Act (Scotland)* of 1992 placed a statutory duty on further education (FE) colleges to have regard to students with disabilities. No statutory duty was applied to higher education but the sector was instructed to 'have regard' to the rights and needs of students with disabilities.

A period of expansion of student numbers in higher education began in the late 1980s. In the early 1990s many of the former centrally funded institutions were granted degree-awarding powers and the title of universities. Many of these institutions had a long history of providing higher education for groups other than traditional university entrants. They were used to the idea of students coming to them through a variety of routes and with qualifications other than the traditional academic ones. Funding for higher education in Scotland came under the auspices of the newly founded Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC). When this was set up the Secretary of State for Scotland gave guidance that it should consider how access to higher education for students with disabilities could be improved. The Council's early disability initiatives were in response to this guidance.

In the course of a few years the higher education sector in Scotland had changed dramatically. All of these factors tended to promote the idea of increased access to higher education for groups who had not been well represented in the past.

The Disabled Students' Allowance

Students who are enrolled on full-time higher education courses, and who qualify for maintenance grants, are also eligible to claim for the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA), if they can show that their disability would affect their undertaking of the course. The DSA consists of three possible allowances: the Basic Allowance for clothing, assessment fees or small items of equipment; an allowance for larger items of equipment (for example, a word processor with Braille printer); and an allowance for non-medical personal help.

Disability Discrimination Act 1995

The *Disability Discrimination Act* of 1995 made it unlawful for providers of services to discriminate against a disabled person by denying services which are available to other members of the public. Although this provision did not apply to education provided by further and higher education institutions, Part 4 of the Act required the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) to have regard to the requirements of disabled persons, and imposed on SHEFC a duty to require higher education institutions to publish Disability Statements containing specified information on their provision for disabled students. SHEFC had, by this time, already launched its series of initiatives in support of students with disabilities, and there had been other factors promoting awareness in this area.

Advances in technology

During the late 1980s and early 1990s there were advances in technology which enabled greater access to educational facilities for many potential students. These advances were particularly apparent in computer technology, but were not confined to it. There are now many alternative input devices available for computers, including adapted keyboards, voice recognition software and scanners. Braille embossers, speech synthesisers and screen magnification software are among the ways in which information can now be output from computers. There have also been advances in processing software to assist with spelling, planning and organisation, and word prediction. All of these devices have helped to overcome some of the barriers which were in the way of students with disabilities.

SHEFC initiatives

SHEFC undertook three initiatives to promote awareness of the needs of students with disabilities and to improve facilities to meet those needs. The first of these was the Disabled Students Initiative (DSI) which was operational in 1993 and 1994. This resulted in an Audit Report on provision in higher education institutions. There was also a publication, *Access to Success*, which was intended as a guide for students with disabilities and others.

Two further SHEFC initiatives were undertaken as a result of the DSI study. The Support for Students with Disabilities – Staff Initiative (SSD-S) extended from 1994 to 1997 and provided funding for part-time co-ordinators for students with disabilities in higher education institutions. It also funded a national co-ordinator to support institutional co-ordinators and networking activities.

The Support for Students with Disabilities – Equipment Initiative (SSD-E) encouraged higher education institutions to bid for funds to improve their levels of equipment support for students with disabilities.

These initiatives have been the subject of SHEFC audit reports (Curran et al, 1994a and 1994b). They were also the subject of an evaluation by a team from Stirling University, led by Professor Sally Brown. That evaluation was concurrent with our project, and there was very useful liaison between the two research teams.

This project

Aims

This project set out with the following key aims:

- to look in detail at the experience of disabled students in higher education institutions in Scotland
- to produce detailed illuminative accounts of the experiences of a small number of disabled students in higher education institutions
- to develop a list of key issues for policy makers to address.

We believed that the accounts produced by this research would be a valuable addition to the previous SHEFC reports and the Stirling evaluation. They had focused on institutional policies and practice, while we would look closely at the experiences of the students.

Methods

We looked for volunteer students who would allow a researcher to follow them through a typical day in the course of their studies, and who would then allow us to spend further time interviewing them in considerable depth about their lives, their experiences and their aspirations. The volunteers also allowed us to discuss their circumstances and experiences with the disability co-ordinator and other key individuals in their higher education experience. The researcher who conducted these observations and interviews maintained contact with the students and re-visited them later in the same academic year for further interviews about their continuing experience.

The first stage of the project consisted of a preliminary survey of disability co-ordinators in Scottish universities and colleges. This was conducted in the summer of 1996. The survey collected some very basic information which was needed for the research. In particular we asked the disability co-ordinators:

- how does their institution define 'disabled students'?
- how many disabled students are currently enrolled on courses?
- what policies and provision are in place to cater for disabled students?
- what systems of monitoring are in place?

The disability co-ordinators assisted us in the selection of volunteer students and helped us to negotiate access to lectures and seminars, and to the institutional premises as a whole, so that we could 'shadow' the students.

The second phase of the project consisted of the observational 'shadowing' of the students and interviewing them and others in depth, as outlined above. At least one week had to be allowed for each student. With average term lengths of twelve weeks, and the need to re-visit students, twelve student volunteers was the maximum which could be fitted into one academic year (once examination timetables and other commitments were taken into account).

We recognised that the need for volunteer students inevitably meant that there would be some self-selection by the students, and that we would have to take

account of this during the analysis and interpretation of the studies. However, it was essential that we enlist genuine volunteers since the intensive and extended nature of the observations and interviews had the effect of making them partners in the research.

The students were all approached through their disability co-ordinators. Letters from the research team were passed to sixty-nine students with disabilities. These letters explained the project and invited the students to take part in it. The students were asked to contact the researchers if they were interested in taking part in the project, and asked to provide some basic information about themselves and their disability. The researchers were unable to identify any of the students until the students contacted them. Twenty-two replies were received from students, although one of these students then asked to withdraw because of pressure of work. It was made clear to the students that the research team were looking for a range of students in different contexts and varying circumstances and that there was no guarantee that they would be included. From the twenty-one students, twelve were selected.

We had intended that the volunteer students would all be drawn from the second and third years of higher education courses. This would have meant that they had all had sufficient experience of their institution to be well informed about its practice, but they were not under the additional pressure of working towards final year examinations. We had one fourth year student who volunteered and was included and one other who was a postgraduate student. The other ten were in either their second or third year of an undergraduate course.

The students who took part were from a variety of higher education institutions, studying on diverse courses. They were geographically spread throughout the country and between them could tell us about their experience with a range of disabilities. Brief descriptions are provided later. Each student was allowed to choose for themselves the name by which they would be known in this report.

Appendix 2 contains some comments on the use of shadowing in this kind of research.

Questionnaire

At the outset of the project we had sent a questionnaire to the disability co-ordinators in all Scottish higher education institutions. Because of the time constraints on the project, and the need to contact the disability co-ordinators as quickly as possible, these had to be sent out over the summer months of 1996. Despite the inevitable clash with holidays, we received replies from nineteen of the disability co-ordinators. There are twenty-one SHEFC-funded higher education institutions, plus the Scottish Agricultural College. All were approached. The Open University in Scotland was not approached.

We sought basic information on policy and procedures in their institutions, but also asked some open questions which we used as a starting point for our discussions with those disability co-ordinators who we interviewed.

Institutional Policies

Sixteen of the nineteen institutions from whom we received replies stated that they had an institutional policy statement on disability. In five of these cases it was explicitly stated that they were in draft form at the time of their replies, and were yet to be fully ratified by the institutional authorities. Of the three institutions which did not have policy statements in summer 1996, one had a policy statement 'in preparation' but not yet in completed draft form; one included disability within their equal opportunities policy document; and another only made reference to the Disability Statement which they were required to publish by SHEFC.

Definitions of 'disability'

This is the definition of 'disability' used by the Stirling evaluation team and in the audit reports written by the SHEFC development officers:

> ... 'students with disabilities' refers to any student with visual, hearing or motor impairment, specific learning difficulties (notably dyslexia), or any medical or psychological impairment, who requires additional support, advice or guidance to enjoy equal access to educational provision.

This definition specifically includes dyslexia, medical and psychological impairments which are sometimes not included in other definitions of 'disability'. It is not a definition based on the notion of physical 'dysfunction' as the prime cause of 'disability' (a 'medical model' of disability). Rather it emphasises equality of access and the barriers within society which prevent equal access. In this view, people with disabilities face barriers because they have to negotiate an environment which was not designed for them, and if they are to enjoy equality of access it is this deficit in the environment which must be overcome. Much of the thinking behind this 'social model' of disability has been developed by disabled people (Finkelstein, 1980; Oliver 1990).

The disability co-ordinators were asked about the definitions of 'disability' which were used in their institutions. There were fifteen replies to this question. In eight of these it was clear that the definition in use was essentially that adopted in the SHEFC audit report (quoted above). It was therefore a definition based on a social model of 'disability' and not a medical model. A further four replies referred to the list of disabilities contained in the UCAS application form. Three of the disability co-ordinators replied that they accepted any definition which the students themselves used.

Student numbers

The questionnaire asked the disability co-ordinators to estimate the number of students with disabilities in their institution. Seventeen replied and indicated that they had knowledge of approximately 3400 students.

It is very difficult to obtain accurate figures for the numbers of students with disabilities in higher education, either in Scotland or in the UK as a whole. Figures which SHEFC have made available to us (March 1997) come from the Disability Statements submitted by higher education institutions. These figures are supplied optionally by institutions, and not all had done so. However, the thirteen

institutions which had supplied figures indicated that they had a total of 2935 students with disabilities. This is approximately 2.5% of the student population of those institutions. This number, of course, represents only those known to the institutions.

This uncertainty is not new. It was commented upon in the Audit Report produced for SHEFC under the DSI:

> ... The figures given by institutions may represent students with disabilities who were identified only because they had requested additional support from services within the institutions they attend. (Curran *et al*, 1994b para 4.13.1)

The UK figures produced by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) show that there were 15699 known students with disabilities out of a total population of 592839 in academic session 1994-95. This included both undergraduates and postgraduates and represented 2.6% of the student population. Previous work has indicated that approximately 5% of the population have a physical or sensory disability without intellectual impairment (Curran et al, 1994b, para 4.12.2).

The largest single group of students with disabilities identified in the responses to our questionnaire were those categorised as having 'chronic medical' conditions (1737) (these would include diabetes, asthma and epilepsy), followed by dyslexia (1023) and then hearing (147), visual (114) and mobility impairment (99). This broadly reflects the pattern evident in HESA figures for the UK in 1994-95.

Some of the earlier difficulties which the Audit Report had in identifying numbers of students with disabilities stem directly from the definition of 'disability' which is used, and from problems of terminology. As the authors of that report noted:

> Some of the students interviewed also expressed concerns about being considered 'disabled'. Those with variable physical difficulties did not consider themselves disabled on a 'good' day and many students with dyslexia did not feel that the term 'disabled' applied to them. Some students with ongoing medical conditions were surprised that they had been identified by their institutions as having a 'disability'. It is likely therefore that the participation rates currently [ie 1994] recorded underestimate the actual attendance rate of students with disabilities ... (Curran *et al*, 1994b, para 4.13.2)

There may be many students who would fit the definition which is used here, but who would not apply the term 'disabled' to themselves. We have no way of knowing how many there may be.

Further information gathered using the questionnaires is included in the chapter on the institutional perspectives.

The structure of the report

The rest of this report looks in detail at the experiences of the twelve students who took part. The report is structured into the following sections.

The students

This section introduces the twelve students with a brief description of each. A table summarising brief details about each of the students is included in appendix 3.

How did they get here?

This section looks at the lives of the students before they entered higher education, and their experiences of application and entry.

Academic matters

This section looks at the experiences which the students have had with university and college staff, academic arrangements for students with disabilities, and their views on equality of opportunity in higher education.

Relating to the institution

This section deals with the ways in which the students relate to their institution and its policies and procedures. It also comments on the confidence (or otherwise) of the students in dealing with institutional procedures and bodies, the role of feedback from the students to the institution, and issues surrounding disclosure and non-disclosure of disability.

Access, mobility and transport

This section discusses obstacles encountered in the physical environment.

Types of support

This section looks at all sources of support which the students draw upon. It covers the role of the disability co-ordinators, support groups, IT and equipment support, finance and personal support. It also discusses in detail the support needs of students with depression.

Social life and accommodation

This section deals with the non-academic side of life in higher education, specifically social life and accommodation.

Thoughts on employment

This section considers the students' thoughts on their careers and where the future might take them.

Institutional perspective

This chapter brings together the views of the staff interviewed to give the institutional perspective on provision for students with disabilities.

Discussion and conclusions

Finally we attempt to draw together the threads of what the students have told us and form some tentative conclusions which may serve as guidance for future developments.

A note on terminology

In writing this report, it has often been necessary to refer to provision that institutions make for students with disabilities, medical conditions, mental health difficulties and dyslexia. This is rather a long phrase and we have sometimes used shorter alternatives. We do not know of any single term which is acceptable to everyone, and we accept that some phrases (such as 'special needs provision') will not be universally popular. The section on 'Terminology' describes the students' views on the use of different terms. Also we have chosen to use the term 'dyslexia' rather than 'specific learning difficulties' throughout the report as this was the phrase most often used by informants.

A note on time

This research was conducted in the academic year 1996-97. The report is written to reflect arrangements and regulations as they were at that time. All references to things which are 'current' or 'present' refer to them as they were in academic year 1996-97 when we were working with the students. Since that time funding arrangements, in particular, have changed. At the time of writing it was not clear what final form they would take. We have therefore chosen to reflect things as they were at the time of the research.

2: The Students

In this chapter we are introduced to the students who took part in the study. We briefly describe their lives before they became students and hear something about their early experiences of university. They each tell us a little about their disability and the ways in which it affects them. They chose the pseudonyms used.

Andrew

Andrew is at art college. He has central vision blindness and is registered blind. He is currently in his third year and is studying ceramics. He feels that he got into art college by chance. When he left school in the 1980's he was fully sighted. He had applied to art college but thought he would not get in because there was so much competition for places. When he was offered a place, he had already started training to become a nurse, so he decided not to accept the offer:

> *... by the time I got the letter I had earned 2 wages and I had bought lots of clothes and I thought I am really enjoying this and I can always draw and paint anyway. So I wrote back to the art school and said thank you for your offer but I have decided to follow this career instead.*

He takes up the story from there:

> *Anyway I did all that nursing and my eyesight problem developed and I left nursing and I spent a year doing not very much at all. But I went to these little ceramic classes which were for visually impaired people for a little hobby. Then it was planned for me to go through to a place ... which has got a rehabilitation centre for the blind and they do a lot of craft work and word processing and that sort of thing ... But it just so happened that like a week before I was meant to go there I received a copy of the art and design prospectus from ... [a further education college for the blind in England]. It was just magically meant to happen that way. But I went in to see and they said look we know you have an A in art, do you want us to read through the prospectus for you. It all sounded really, really interesting and I thought great I will do a years course. I didn't think beyond that year. I went down and I really enjoyed what I was doing.*

Students at the college were encouraged to think about what they would like to do after the course by their tutors. Andrew was really enjoying the course and he mentioned this to his tutor, saying that he would like to study art further. His tutor encouraged him to put together a portfolio and apply to art college. He knew that he wanted to return to Scotland to be near his family and to live somewhere familiar. He applied to four Scottish institutions, putting his present college first. He knew that having been offered an unconditional place by the institution in the past might provide an advantage.

He applied to do drawing and painting initially but his application was unsuccessful. It was passed on to the ceramics department, however, who invited him for an interview:

> *When I applied ... I actually applied for drawing and painting and I was sort of diverted into ceramics. Initially I thought a lot of that was like prejudice. I thought well they are probably thinking well how can someone who is visually impaired work on a flat surface and appreciate what they are doing but like I thought about it over the years and ... it still has a very good When I applied ... I actually applied for drawing and painting and I was sort reputation for its painting department ... a lot of people that applied at that time really were applying for drawing and painting. So they were getting a massive number of*

applicants and I was probably not amongst the best, even though I might have thought I was, so I got to enter ceramics.

He was offered a place by the ceramics department and he is now quite happily studying ceramics.

The art college had never had a visually impaired student before and there was some discussion before Andrew started his course about the practical implications of a blind student studying ceramics:

I know there were quite lengthy debates before I came about health and safety and so on. Because at that time there was a lot of health and safety legislation that had been changed and I know some people were quite anxious about me coming here and working with hot kilns and obstacles. But it was more ... from a health and safety point of view not ... prejudice about me. I know that now but at the time, I suppose I felt really vulnerable and I thought 'oh they are all against me', but that wasn't the case.

They also wanted to know at interview how he would record things visually onto paper during the course:

They asked me how, as a visually impaired person, how I could record things visually onto paper. I am not sure exactly of my answer but ... there were 3 different art lecturers on the interview panel and I said well I would do it in exactly the same way that you would do it. You could sit the three of you in front of a still life and maybe you would focus on the tone of the objects, make it a composition of that, and maybe you would be more interested in the line and maybe you are more interested in form or shape. So you might all do it the same but like because you are all individuals and different things are important to you then you just take different approaches and I just explained that when I do it ... intensity of colour is important and areas of light and dark are more important and that is the kind of things that I look at and ... the mass form is more important than the detail. I said look when I did my higher art as a fully sighted person ... detail was ultimately important and it was expected of me at that point from the curriculum for Higher Art, you were expected to do highly detailed analytical drawings. But I gradually moved on from that and just the way that I see things now, I see mass shape and form and I don't see detail so I don't see the point in recording things that I can't see and I just explained it that way. They seemed quite impressed ... It was almost like – how dare you ask how I paint? I just paint what I see. I just do it in the same way that they do.

Andrew tapes lectures, then puts any key phrases that are relevant to essays into his computer, because it is difficult to find passages on tapes. He has a computer with a voice synthesiser, bought with the disabled students' allowance (DSA), which reads back what he has typed in. A local resource centre reads books onto tape for him, but they can get very busy at certain times of the year and it sometimes takes up to six weeks to get books read. He has tended to need extensions for his essays and has usually had no problem getting these. In the studio, he has few difficulties although he needs help loading the kilns and weighing ingredients.

In his first year, he found it a shock coming to art college from the college for the blind. There the low student:tutor ratio had meant he had received lots of feedback and encouragement. In higher education there were many more students and less opportunities for feedback on his work:

I'd lost a lot of confidence by the time Christmas came. The written work was getting me down as well because I couldn't keep up with that and it ended up – I went away for a fortnight then and came back and just felt I couldn't cope with it.

He discussed his difficulties with his tutors and they agreed that he should take some time off and start the course again in the autumn. This worked out well in the long-run, although he found it frustrating in some ways starting the course again, because he knew more what to expect the second time around and was more relaxed.

Catherine

Catherine is doing an honours degree in publishing. She is currently in her second year of full-time study. She describes her disability as follows:

> *My disability is mild cerebral palsy which affects my speech and fine motor skills and my balance.*

She came to university straight from school. She was originally considering doing either history or publishing. Then she got heavily involved in publishing the school year book and really enjoyed it. From early March in her sixth year she was clear that she wanted to do publishing.

She applied to two places that offered courses in publishing and visited both. At her present institution, she got a good first impression, mainly through talking to the course leader who was very positive about having her on the course.

She had used a laptop computer throughout school because an assessment in primary 7 had identified that typing is easier for her than handwriting. Her course leader helped her to apply for a laptop computer through the DSA. She uses this to take notes in tutorials, to write essays and in exams. She had also been given extra time in exams at school and he arranged this for her at university.

She is really enjoying university life. The people on her course are very friendly with each other and she has made friends through living in a student flat in the first year. She says that sometimes the workload is quite high, but she is doing well academically.

Gary

Gary is doing a one year post-graduate course in IT support. He describes his disability as follows:

> *Chronic back degeneration and clinical depression.*

His wife died last year, after 25 years of marriage, and this has brought on his depression. His main difficulties are concentration and motivation. His mind is often too pre-occupied with his personal situation for him to be able to study.

The university have been very supportive academically and he has received much support from the welfare service.

He is very glad to be doing the course, even when he finds it difficult, because it gives a structure to his day and gets him out of bed in the morning. It provides him with a goal, even if sometimes that goal does not seem very inspiring:

> *I feel like an opportunity has presented itself for me but the drive to achieve the goal is not there now as a result of the loss I've suffered. The struggle to push myself, sometimes it's not too bad, other days it's monumental. ... It's like trying to climb Mount Everest.*

He was born in the USA. He started a college course there, but was drafted to Vietnam and did not complete his degree. He first came to Scotland with the Navy. He met and married his wife here and stayed. They had three children, one by marriage and two from his wife's previous marriage.

He previously worked as a self-employed commissioning engineer, but gave up his business when his wife became seriously ill. He decided to retrain at university, because he is now looking for a sedentary occupation because of his back problems.

He completed an HNC by correspondence last year, but decided that he needed more qualifications as he has found not having a degree has been a barrier to his progress. He was considering doing his present course by correspondence, but his GP suggested that studying full-time might provide a therapeutic diversion for him when his wife died.

Gary is missing cartilage between two vertebrae:

> *... there is nothing left so I've got bones against bones pinching the nerves that run between them. And the other ones are deteriorating, and I've got two knees that are deteriorating.*

He needs to move and stretch regularly because of this and finds it difficult to sit down for long periods. He has a designated parking space to limit the amount of walking that he has to do.

Jim

Jim has a visual impairment. He is in his third year, studying history. He went to a school for the deaf and blind and came straight from there to university. He knew at school that he wanted to go to university. His school encouraged him in this and took him to open days at different universities so that he could find out what they were like. He originally wanted to study to become a journalist, but was told by a careers adviser that his lack of practical experience would prevent him from getting a place. He decided instead to study history and is planning to do a post-graduate course in journalism.

He has his own computer with a voice synthesiser, bought with money from the DSA. The computer software will produce files as braille or ink print. He also has a braille note-taker which he uses in lectures and in exams. The library staff help him to find books that he needs, then he employs a fellow student to read relevant sections onto tape. He pays his reader using money from the DSA.

There is a designated unit for visually impaired students at his institution, where Jim and other students keep their computers. There is also a scanner in the unit, which reads text or saves it to disk. The students have 24 hour access to the building, which means they have the same flexibility that other students have who can handwrite their essays.

He says it took him a while to settle into university life. In the first term of his first year, he was unsure how much work he would have to do and tended to do more than he needed to. This meant he did not socialise very much with other

students. After the first term, however, he felt he was starting to settle in and find his way around:

> *Academically it always seemed ... an extension of school ... a couple of problems of just having to make everybody aware of your needs and whatever. Adjusting to a new place, it was quite difficult at first, basically because I felt that I had to ... be working all the time ... to pass my course. ... In fresher's week I would hear ... vastly exaggerated claims of how much work you'd all have to do to pass the course ... so I didn't make ... a lot of friends in the first term. Although I did meet people every so often ... It was just basically after that I started to realise that people doing a lot less work than me were getting the same or better grades than I was. So at first it was quite difficult to adjust to the new place and checking that I knew where I was going and everything, but by the end of first term I think I was starting to get better at that. I was starting to make more contacts with the university and other students.*

Jim is now really enjoying being at university. He has an active social life, and is a member of several different societies. He feels the facilities he needs are in place and is very positive about his university. This is partly because the university and his department have previous experience of teaching visually impaired students and partly because he is open and proactive in asking for what he needs.

Katy

Katy is studying third year accountancy and finance. She has ME, which she describes as follows:

> *I suffer from ME which causes problems with muscle weakness, short-term memory and concentration. Due to these things I have problems with handwriting. I also have very little stamina and generally cannot function for a whole day. I have to pace myself and ensure that lectures and tutorials are spread as evenly across the week as possible. The university do provide academic support, which helps.*

She worked in banking before she came to university and had been considering studying part-time before she became ill. She had the option of doing an MBA while working but was advised against combining work and study by her GP. When she first became ill she thought it would last about 6 months, perhaps a year, and she decided to do an undergraduate degree full-time. She applied to do business studies and was accepted by her present institution. In the event, however, she decided to defer for a year due to ill health. At the end of that year, she felt too ill to start the course, but her GP suggested that she try doing it anyway. She looked at the course structure and thought that she could perhaps do one-third of the first year to begin with and then two-thirds of it in her second year. She approached the university about this and they agreed to let her start the course on that basis.

She started her business degree, but soon realised that she would prefer to do accountancy and finance. She sought advice from the careers adviser on the implications of switching, then asked the university whether it would be possible. The accountancy and finance department agreed, even though they did not then have a formal part-time degree pathway. Because she had academic credit for her banking qualifications she was accepted into the second year. She studied part-time for the first year and a half. She is now in her third year of study, and is registered

full-time, although she has negotiated to do about two-thirds the number of courses that full-time students do, and she will take five years to complete her degree.

She describes how difficult it was coming to university after two years of illness, during which she had largely been confined to the house. Going into a lecture hall full of people for the first time was, she says, a difficult experience:

> *I think if you have a disability and you're out and about a lot anyway you probably don't particularly notice it. But if you have something that impairs that, you do notice it, really it is a culture shock. It is quite difficult, going into tutorials and having confidence to say what you think, what you feel. First year was a big crisis of confidence actually.*

She also describes how, through coming to university, she was confronted by the difference between her ability to do things and the abilities of others:

> *... you came to this somewhere at the back of your mind hoping this would be you getting your life back and the first couple of weeks you walk about and you see people playing football and hockey and going out and getting pissed and doing all the things that a young person in their late teens or early twenties does that you can't do. And that's very hard and I'm certainly not the only one who's found that very hard, being put in an environment and seeing all these people able to do things that you want to do and you can't.*

There is still a controversy surrounding ME within the medical profession. According to Katy's GP:

> *... some doctors still refuse to accept it, some feel it's a form, an atypical form of depression. Others are utterly convinced it's some sort of viral attack on nerve cells or on the junction between nerves and muscles.*

Because of this, Katy has met with disbelief amongst medical personnel. Her main difficulty has been convincing people at the university of her needs. This is partly because there is no outward sign of her illness and partly because some members of staff do not understand the implications of having ME:

> *... from all the staff I have met in the university, those who have any understanding of your situation are those who, in some way, have some personal experience. They will know somebody with it, even if it's only vaguely, or know of somebody ... But it's from their own personal experience, it's not from the university saying look students with ME can have X, Y and Z problems.*

She says that academically, the university have been very supportive, although it has taken a while for her department to get to know her and her needs. Her main difficulties with the institution have centred around accommodation. These are discussed later in the report.

Lillian

Lillian is now in her second year at university, studying sociology and social policy. She describes her disability as follows:

> *Cerebral palsy from birth. This only affects my legs. I have mobility, balance and co-ordination problems because of this. I use a wheelchair most of the time when I am at university although I also use sticks.*

Before Lillian came to university, she worked for 17 years as a secretary in a large company. She was made redundant in what she feels were dubious circumstances. She believes she was discriminated against because of her disability, but could not prove it. She was unemployed for eight months which she describes as 'pure hell'. During this time she applied for numerous jobs without success in spite of her

many years of experience. She started retraining through her local job centre, but could not complete the training because the course organisers were unable to get a local company to provide her with a placement. Without the placement, she could not get the qualification. At about this time, a good friend suggested she try and get into university. The friend had recently completed an Access course at their local FE college and told Lillian which member of staff to approach. Lillian had always wanted to go to university, so she decided to follow this up.

Lillian passed a series of entrance tests at the FE college and was delighted when she was accepted onto the Access course:

> *I was in tears on the phone it was such a good feeling, after all these months of trying to get a job and being knocked back, somebody wanted me and was on the other end of the phone telling me 'we think you've got what it takes to make it to university'.*

At this time, large areas of the college buildings were not accessible to a person using a wheelchair. The college welfare adviser talked this over with Lillian. He says that the college offered a positive approach and a degree of flexibility only: it was largely due to Lillian's own determination and willingness to get round obstacles that she got through the course. While at the further education college she climbed staircases when she had to, studied parts of her course by herself using facilities that were accessible to her and used distance learning when the weather made it difficult for her to get to college.

She does voluntary work with several disability organisations and is active in the Students' Association, currently holding the elected post of equal opportunities officer. In the first week of her first year, she fell out of her wheelchair because some of the pavements were not ramped. This experience prompted her to stand for the post of disabilities officer which was vacant at that point. She will stand for disabilities officer again next year, as, she says, that is where her heart lies.

Lillian says she used to feel hurt and demoralised at 16 or 17 when confronted with an obstacle or a barrier. Now, in her thirties, after having been to the 'bad old university of life', as she puts it, she goes away and works out a strategy for getting around a barrier or removing it:

> *I've been told by other professionals that I work with on my various committees that my eagerness, my commitment to disability issues just comes over so positively, that it affects people I'm with. ... [Disability co-ordinator] calls me – because we laugh at this – I'm a doer and a shover she says.*

She has built up a network of influential contacts who she can call on to help her. She also has a wealth of equal opportunities experience and knows where to get information on her legal position, if necessary:

> *I just now turn round and say 'sorry I'm not accepting that' and they look at me and go 'uh-oh'. Because you are not meant to do that. You are meant to sit back and say 'OK fine. Sorry to bother you, sort of thing, sorry I'm not happy with that decision'.*

She has found returning to studying has really boosted her confidence:

> *Because I went through losing my job and my marriage break up, my self-confidence was so low, it was almost non-existent. The college started to build it up again. And I've just got to keep that going.*

She is very positive about her institution. While problems do still arise, there is a positive attitude throughout the university towards disability. She says the university involves students in decisions on disability, asks the students what they need, rather than assuming that they know already and sees students with disabilities as students first.

Lisa

Lisa is training to be a primary teacher and is in her third year of teacher training. She has dyslexia which affects her reading and spelling:

> *When I read something I can focus on one word and the rest of the text moves, so it is all really blurry. Then I'd get to the end of the line, I never seem to manage to follow on to the line you are supposed to go on to next. Sometimes I will look at the first part of a word and make up the rest of it without realising. I will just assume I have read correctly but it doesn't make sense so I have to go back and read it again. It might take me 3 or 4 attempts until that sentence makes sense. So, by the time that's happened I have forgotten what the rest of the text is about. It is an awful lot of hard work and I end up giving up.*

Lisa only discovered that she was dyslexic in her first year in higher education. At school, she was clearly a bright student. She won several prizes for languages, but would always get essays back covered in red pen because of all the spelling mistakes. She would do well throughout the year, then consistently get poor exam results:

> *It was not because I was a nervous person because I'm not I am really quite confident. But when it came to exams, I couldn't cope with the pressure of having to read within a certain time and half of the time I read the question wrongly anyway.*

She says she found it extremely frustrating that her grades never seemed to reflect her abilities:

> *It was just basically because I wasn't achieving the grades that I knew I could, but I didn't know why. It was so frustrating because I was working as hard as I could. That was my best work and it didn't matter how much I applied myself I just couldn't do it.*

She was put into a remedial group because of her spelling. She says she felt really embarrassed about this and did not find it helpful:

> *I had to do all these pointless exercises, writing out spelling, after spelling, after spelling. These exercises made no difference because I just can't learn that way. I just had to waste so much time and it was so frustrating.*

At school, she had always assumed she would go on to higher education because that is what her sister had done, but one of her teachers told her that she would not manage it. She started to get very demoralised and her confidence was diminishing. In her 3rd year, she joined a youth theatre outside of school. Through this she saw that she was capable of doing all kinds of things, even if she could not spell or read very well. This boosted her confidence, which affected her feelings about her school work. The more people told her she could not do something, the more determined she became to do it. She started to find strategies to get around her difficulties:

> *I started to become quite determined and very annoyed when people said "no you can't do it". I think my parents had a lot to do with my determination as well because they were very encouraging. Then I started employing strategies of*

> *my own, for example, with higher English. I loved higher English but I couldn't read the books – we read plays and poetry and they were all fine because of the way they were laid out. The plays are fairly easy to read and I also managed to get them out on video to watch over and over again. Eventually I knew the whole play off by heart. We had to do a review of personal reading. This involves reading a novel and analysing it but I knew that I wouldn't be able to do that. I asked if I could review poetry instead and I got the top mark in the year for it. I had done it all on computer so that I wouldn't be penalised for my spelling. Unfortunately in the exams you are actually penalised for spelling.*

Lisa decided she wanted to become a teacher and applied to do teacher training. It was during a language class on specific learning difficulties in her first year, that Lisa started to suspect that she may have dyslexia:

> *One day we were talking in Language about children with learning difficulties, in particular dyslexia. I recognised some of the behavioural tendencies and I thought 'Is that not what is supposed to happen?' When the tutor spoke about text moving on the page and things like this, I thought 'But that describes me.' I went along to speak to her and she did a quick test with me to establish if I had dyslexic tendencies.*

On the basis of this test, Lisa was advised to see the disability co-ordinator, who arranged for her to have a formal assessment. The assessment confirmed that she did in fact have dyslexia.

Finding out that she is dyslexic has had a very positive effect on Lisa's grades. Before the assessment, she was getting C's on average and she was convinced that that was all she was capable of. Now she understands that she has specific difficulties and a recognised condition, her marks have improved considerably:

> *My marks have gone up quite a lot because now I know I'm not stupid not because anybody else knows, I wouldn't want to be graded differently – that is unrealistic.*

Lisa has worked out several strategies for overcoming her difficulties. She uses a computer for her assignments. The software checks spellings and will read work out to her, if necessary. She has a pocket lexicon which she uses to check spellings if she has to write anything. Her flat mate will sometimes check through her work for spelling mistakes and will usually discuss assignment questions with her to make sure that she has understood them fully. On placement, if she writes anything on the board, she prepares it in advance, and if children ask her for spellings, she helps them to find them in the dictionary.

She believes her difficulties will provide her with an advantage when she becomes a teacher:

> *I think it is an advantage to me to be honest because I can put myself in the place of children who are having difficulties. I know exactly how they feel and I think that children should know that teachers don't know everything. None of us are perfect.*

Mark

Mark is studying for a BSc in business computing. He is currently in his second year and came to university straight from school. He describes his disability as follows:

> *My disability is called cerebral dyplegia which reduces the amount of flexibility and strength I have in my legs.*

Mark's disability affects his mobility. He does not use a wheelchair, although, at birth, doctors expected that he would use one throughout his life:

> *When I was born I was supposed to be in a wheelchair all my life and then I got up to a couple of years ago, I was going about, I could do 35 miles on my bike in one go, and I was feeling great. For some reason I could cycle for miles but I could only walk a short distance, which was quite annoying.*

He relies on his car for transport to and from university. He says he finds it very tiring getting around university:

> *I don't notice so much now how tiring it actually is because it's not until ... I get back to the flat and I lie on my bed and just watch the TV and then I'm ... falling asleep, I can barely bother to get up. To start off with I thought it was just laziness, I thought God, just lazy, get up and get on with your work. But it really is like physical tiredness.*

He says that he wanted to come to college or university even when he was in primary school. He had watched his father struggle to find employment because he did not have qualifications. His mother encouraged him to come but left the final decision up to him. He is interested in doing computing or managerial type jobs and he knew that he would need a degree to get into these areas.

After leaving school, he decided to take a year off. At the last minute he changed his mind and decided to try and get into university. He applied during the Summer which meant he did not go through the usual pre-entry procedures. This had implications for the support he received from the institution. This is discussed in the next chapter.

Mike

Mike came to university straight from school and is in the second year of a computer science degree. He describes his disability as follows:

> *I have several different problems with my vision which reduce my effective vision level to 6/36.*

He knew from early on that he wanted to come to university, but says that some of his teachers did not encourage him in this:

> *From about middle to end of second year, before I even started Standard Grades I wanted to come to university, I wanted to do a computing course. But in secondary school it was a case of, well we're not going to help you because we don't think that, because of your problem, we don't think you're going to do as well.*

His mother was also convinced that he would not manage it financially. In spite of this, Mike knew that he wanted to go to university:

> *In fact in a lot of ways the discouragement made me more determined, you know. I was sort of determined to prove everybody wrong ... I can do it, I will do it.*

He also knew from early on that he wanted to study computing, as it was one of his favourite subjects at school:

> *Computing is my strong point, mainly because it's all sitting and tinkering ... you can learn a lot of theory about computing and you can put that to good use, but you don't have to learn that theory from books, you can learn it from the computer itself.*

He started off doing an HND, but was allowed to transfer to the degree programme halfway through his first year.

He needs large print copies of handouts and overhead projection sheets from lecturers. He sometimes uses a scanner, available in the library, to scan text from books onto a computer screen. He tapes lectures and takes notes during lectures or tutorials using a laptop computer. He can usually read text on a computer screen if the font is large enough. In his first year, the department installed screen magnification software onto the departmental computers, but he tends not to use it as it makes it more difficult to see the overall picture.

He has had very positive experiences with the staff at the university:

> *There's very much a 'we want to help' attitude throughout the whole university. Sometimes different parts of the university don't talk to each other very well ... but that's getting sorted as well. It's just a case of when different people within the university are free to meet and talk to other people.*

Richard

Richard is in his second year of a degree in philosophy and art history. He has dyslexia which, he says, in his case is:

> *... manifested in handwriting, spelling, reading, memory and sentence composition.*

Richard went to a small school with 18 pupils and two teachers. He says it was not through a lack of teaching that he only learned to read when he was eight. At secondary school, he was given extra lessons but he used to think to himself that they were a waste of time because extra teaching was not actually going to improve his difficulties. He says he found his dyslexia very frustrating. He did exams orally at school and, he says, he has no problem marshalling his thoughts and expressing them in this way. It is only when he starts to write them down that he encounters difficulties.

Partly because of his dyslexia, Richard drifted towards science subjects at school and was encouraged in that direction by his teachers. When he first left school, he started a degree in chemistry and maths at a different university from the one he is at now. He dropped out after a year because, he says, the subjects did not interest him. The university he was at also never mentioned dyslexia, although he had spoken to them about it. For the next few years he did odd jobs and started to read books:

> *I think dyslexia had been part of the decision why I hadn't done arts originally but purely because I had managed to get myself into reading over a few years, just sitting in pubs with books I actually enjoyed, actually got me into the swing of reading.*

After a few years he decided to return to university, this time to study arts subjects. He applied, but was rejected because he did not have appropriate Highers. He was considering taking more Highers through evening classes, when he heard from a friend about Access courses. He did an access course, partly to get into university and partly to relearn how to write an essay. He applied to the Access course and to his present university at the same time and was accepted by both.

When Richard reads, text in his peripheral vision vibrates. This is exacerbated by fluorescent or white lights. Tinted spectacles and a daylight lamp help to reduce this. When writing, he makes a lot of spelling mistakes and sometimes reverses sentences. When he reads over his work, he does not see the mistakes. He says he usually makes several spelling mistakes in the title of an essay and then in his own name. Computer spell-checkers do help to some extent, but tend not to have specialist dictionaries relevant to his subjects. He finds taking notes in lectures very difficult. Writing requires a lot of concentration for him and he rarely does it in lectures because it is too distracting. He tries to get copies of handouts before lectures, so that he can read over them in advance and he may write one or two words onto the handout in the course of a lecture, otherwise he simply listens. He says copying is awful because it involves both reading and writing. If he has to copy anything, he does it letter by letter and still sometimes gets the letters wrong when he writes them down. He also has difficulties with his short-term memory: he sometimes cannot remember from one hour to the next what he is supposed to be doing.

Richard has an active social life and is involved in several different university societies, as well as being involved in the student representative council (SRC). He is attending university in his home town, although he lives in student halls.

Sandra

Sandra is in her third year, studying English literature. She describes herself as speech deaf. She can hear sound, but cannot decipher the words, unless, as happens occasionally they are at a certain frequency. If she can see the speaker, then she lip-reads:

> *My hearing is the equivalent of radio stations being jumbled up where you might get one word, but when they look at you ... I'm not saying it's 100%, but the difference is phenomenal.*

At school, she was regarded as a slow learner. Her hearing difficulty was not diagnosed until she was 18 or 19. Her parents thought she could hear them when she wanted to. What they did not realise was that she could hear them when she could see them. She says that people seem to regard someone who is deaf as stupid:

> *... when you tell people you're deaf they shout at you as if miraculously them shouting, you will know what they're saying. Along with deafness comes the idea of stupidity, that, you know, you don't warrant an explanation because you wouldn't understand an explanation if they gave it to you.*

She had always wanted to go to university and when her daughter had grown up and gone to college, Sandra decided to go too. She got into university by doing an access course. She did not discuss her hearing difficulty with the college or the university and was not aware that she might be entitled to support until her second year at university. She believed that she would just have to get by.

In order to hear, Sandra needs to be able to see the speaker. In lectures she asks the lecturer to wear a radio mike which amplifies sound into an ear-piece that she wears. She finds it difficult to take notes in lectures, because she cannot lip-read and write at the same time. If she has not managed to take many notes during

a lecture, she asks the lecturer for a copy of the lecture notes. She finds it difficult if a speaker turns away, covers his or her mouth or speaks quickly. She went to one lecturer recently to ask him to speak more slowly:

> *I said to him you rushed through it and I ... got the odd word now and again, but I couldn't keep up. I can't remember looking at the notes I did take because I was busy trying to get them down, trying to watch him and I was missing all sorts. The result is I can't fill in, so I went and I asked him if I could have a copy of the lecture and he said yes.*

In tutorials, she needs people to face her when they speak. She realises that this may seem strange to people at first:

> *I understand that my deafness can embarrass people because they have to look at me and I have to look at them and a lot of people become very uncomfortable. I mean I do sympathise with them, but if only, maybe just say for half an hour, they heard the way I do, you know, you think okay I will look at her.*

She says that she finds lip-reading tiring and sometimes chooses not to try to understand what people are saying:

> *If I've had a really busy day it's amazing how tired you do become because you've got to concentrate all the time. You can't afford not to concentrate because if you don't, you don't hear anything. And then if someone asks you something – blank, and I hate being in that position where I've been caught out.*

In first year, Sandra got by using various strategies and usually borrowed other students' lecture notes. She is always well prepared for lectures and tutorials so that she can fill in gaps if she only understands one or two words in a sentence:

> *I've got to read up, you know, I can't just walk into a lecture blind, I've got to read up on what they're going to be doing in the lecture. So that if I get a word, I think oh yes I know what you're talking about here. Because if I don't I'm floundering.*

She says she does feel demoralised sometimes and wonders why she is doing this. But she is generally glad to be at university. Before she came to university she was a wife and mother, here she is regarded as a person in her own right:

> *... here I'm Sandra, I'm me, I'm a person and my views count.*

Zoë

Zoë is in her final year of a degree in biomedical sciences. She has dyslexia which she describes as follows:

> *I have difficulties spelling, memory (short-term), being able to express myself on paper and difficulties in reading.*

Zoë's dyslexia was not formally assessed at school until she was in her fourth year. Before this formal recognition of her learning difficulties, her teachers tended to think that she was not capable of studying or that she was not working hard enough. They told her she would not get any qualifications, but she went ahead and sat exams anyway:

> *When I went to high school I was told I probably wouldn't get my Standard Grades and then I got my Standard Grades. And then they said they didn't think I would get my Highers. And if it wasn't for the science department in the school because they sort of kept themselves separate from the rest of the school, i.e. the English and arts side, I probably wouldn't have got any Highers. So it was them who gave me the encouragement.*

Because the science department were more encouraging than the other departments she gravitated towards science subjects:

> *It was a natural funnelling into science. It wasn't deliberate. I've always enjoyed science but had I been given more encouragement I would have liked to have done something more artistic but the encouragement wasn't there and I was pushed towards science.*

She had always thought she would go on to higher education and, in spite of the negative messages that she was getting from her school, she kept working towards that goal. Her parents were always very encouraging and when the time came, she simply applied without any advice or assistance from her school.

Because her psychologist's assessment at school had not labelled her difficulties as dyslexia, she did not tick that box on her UCAS form. Also she could see no advantage in declaring her learning difficulties:

> *People just think dyslexia and you're stupid and people don't really understand about it so you just tend to keep it quiet so I didn't tell very many people in the first and second year.*

She struggled in her first year. She could not understand why she kept getting low marks when she seemed to be working much harder than any of her friends. She started getting quite demoralised and began to think that she simply was not cut out for higher education:

> *I was getting so annoyed ... why wasn't I doing as well as I thought I should be doing? What with the amount of time I was spending on course work, it was really frustrating. ... I was spending so many hours on doing something and you think you've cracked it and then you get it back and there are all these mistakes and things you've missed out and bad structure where friends could do it in a night, the night before, and they'd get much higher marks than me. You just think oh God there's something not right here. ... So I was getting ... basically sick of it, so I just decided to go and find out a wee bit more. Just to find out do I have a problem or am I just stupid.*

Her sense of frustration led her to seek information from a local dyslexia association. They advised her to contact the disability co-ordinator. She says that she did not even know that he existed at this point. The co-ordinator suggested that she should have a comprehensive assessment and advised her that she may be entitled to apply for the DSA.

The assessment proved to be a turning point. It told her in much more detail than her school assessment what her difficulties were, which, she says, allowed her to work out strategies to overcome them:

> *It made me understand what my problems were so that I could go about tackling them and how to improve them so in that respect it was very good to have. ... It made you more content, you do have a problem but you can get over it, you just need to think about it in a different way.*

She found out that her reading speed is far below average. So she knows now to allow herself plenty of time to read anything. She also knows that she has difficulties copying from overheads in lectures because her short-term memory only allows her to retain three or four words at a time. She is also unlikely to take in the meaning of the words while she is copying. So now she asks lecturers for copies of overheads or notes so that she is free to listen and understand in lectures. If a lecturer has no overheads to give her, she asks for references so that she can

read up and make her own notes after the lecture. She now knows that stress affects her dyslexia, so if she finds herself under pressure while she is reading or writing, she takes a break and tries to relax. In exams, this is difficult to do and she believes that dyslexia affects her exam performance because she sometimes misreads the question

She sees her dyslexia as an advantage in a way, because she has learned to plan ahead and work hard. She also tends to participate in lectures, as she has found that this helps her to understand:

> *For me to ask questions or suggest things it sticks in my head more rather than just sitting there listening. You can sit there and look as if you're listening but you're not. But if you are actually taking part in something it sticks in your head.*

3: How Did They Get Here?

Routes into higher education

The previous chapter introduced the twelve students and described the different routes that they had taken into higher education. Six of them had come straight from school and six had had a gap between school and higher education. Several of those returning to education after a gap had gained access to higher education via further education.

In this chapter we discuss the advice and guidance which the students had received before they entered university and as they were applying. We also look at what can happen to students who make a late application to university. Finally we draw together some lessons from what the students have told us.

Guidance, advice and encouragement

Some of the students coming straight from school had received support and encouragement from their schools about entering higher education. Jim's school, for example, had taken him to visit several institutions to enable him to find out what they offered before applying.

Several other students, however, reported being actively discouraged by their schools. This seemed to be particularly acute for Lisa and Zoë, both dyslexic students. They described getting negative messages from some of their teachers about their academic abilities and their ability to enter higher education. Mike also described getting little support because his teachers did not think he would make it into higher education.

Those students who had studied in further education had received varying amounts of support and advice. Andrew had been actively encouraged and supported when applying to art school by his further education tutors. Lillian also received support from her college welfare adviser. Richard on the other hand received little guidance while he was doing his access course because his application to higher education had already been made and accepted at the same time as his application to further education.

Most of the students, it seems, chose to apply to higher education and did so regardless of the level of support or encouragement they did or did not receive. All the students in this project were already in higher education and it is difficult therefore to assess from this research how many students choose not to apply because of discouragement or lack of support or guidance.

Guidance resources

There are few resources available offering guidance to students with disabilities on accessing higher education. One of the few is *Access to Success*, published by SHEFC. Only a small number of the students knew about this publication. When they had read it, they had found it useful or had favourable opinions of it. For example, Jim thought it had some good advice in and liked the fact that it was

comprehensive, covering a broad definition of disability. Katy came across it in the occupational health unit at her institution. It suggested that she might be entitled to rest periods in exams. She showed this to her department and they agreed that she should get them.

Choice of institution

When it came to choosing an institution, support available for students with disabilities and the institution's general approach towards disability were important factors for five of the students. For the others, these were not factors in their choice of institution. For some of them this was because they were not aware that they may be entitled to any kind of additional support.

Lillian's main criterion when choosing an institution was the institution's provision for students with disabilities, but she was also happy that her chosen institution had a good reputation academically:

> *My first priority had to be the special needs provision, it just had to be. Call it slight snobbery if you like but I knew that ... [this university] is better thought of than X [another university]. And that was at the back of my mind as well.*

With the help of the welfare adviser at her further education college, Lillian made contact with all the institutions she was considering applying to. Her present institution was, by far, the most accessible, and where there were obstacles to access, the institution was at least aware of this.

Mike ticked a box on the UCAS form specifying his disability. Only his present university responded to this by sending him information on support available and inviting him to visit the university to discuss his needs. This was his main reason for choosing this institution. Mike said that:

> *... this university is the only place that sent me any information about what they would do, could do, for disabled students. And I just thought well I'm going there because ... nowhere else sent anything like that.*

He also got a good impression of the university when he visited. He spent about an hour and a half with the member of staff designated as the departmental disability contact. His needs were discussed at this meeting and it was agreed that the department would provide him with large print copies of handouts and overheads.

Jim was impressed by the provision for visually impaired students when he first visited his present university, but says this was only part of the reason why he chose this institution. Jim said:

> *I quite liked the campus environment and it seemed quite a compact campus and other students seemed very friendly. ...It had experience of quite a few visually impaired people before and it was quite a good set-up here with the visual impairment unit being already established within the university ... I was hearing there was a lot of experience here and ... experience of special needs tied in very well I think with the campus. I wouldn't just have gone there because they had experience of special needs and I was told by people not to go there for that reason ... But I liked the campus and the staff seemed very friendly and welcoming and I think looking back that I did make a good choice. I've enjoyed it a lot and I've made a lot of friends.*

Catherine applied to two places that offered courses in publishing and visited both. At her present institution, she got a good first impression, mainly through talking

to the course leader who was very positive about having her on the course. Catherine said:

> *... [the course leader] called me down for an interview ... and I told him that I'd used a computer through high school and for my exams and he's always been really ... supportive and like, oh don't worry, we'll sort it out, don't you ever feel that there's going to be problems concerning your disability or with the course, we want you here.*

When Gary was considering further study, he approached two institutions. He chose his present university because the staff he met seemed very helpful. They seemed to be well prepared to support students with disabilities. The other institution did not seem as interested in helping him. When he applied, he had not been diagnosed as having depression, so only his back problems were taken into account. His first impressions have proved to be right and he has found the university very supportive:

> *... as far as I'm concerned the university has been great for help. A lot of people there wanted me to enter, they've helped me through stuff, I've had counselling, they've helped me get the paper work filled out for my benefit, ... [the disability co-ordinator] has been a big help ... they've got a good system for helping people who are disabled.*

Richard and Andrew simply chose the courses they wanted in locations that suited them. Andrew wanted to return to familiar surroundings and Richard's university had links with the access course that he had taken. Richard expected to meet with a variable response to his dyslexia as this is what he had encountered at school, so he made his choice for other reasons. Richard said:

> *I know at school there were certain teachers who were very good and certain teachers who weren't and you just expect that through life – some people will understand and some people don't.*

For the remaining five students, special needs provision was not a factor in their choice because they did not know that they might be entitled to any kind of additional support. Lisa did not know that she had dyslexia when she applied, so simply chose the course that she wanted. Zoë did not know that she might be entitled to support and could see no advantage in declaring her dyslexia. Mark, Sandra and Katy thought that it was simply up to them to cope with any difficulties they may encounter because of their disabilities.

Late application

Most institutions now have formal pre-entry procedures which involve sending information about support available for students with disabilities out to students when they apply, then arranging for a pre-entry visit where appropriate. This system can break down, if a student does not declare a disability or applies late.

Mark applied at the last minute. He had decided to take a year off after leaving school, then changed his mind just before the start of the academic year. He managed to secure his current place at university over the telephone. Because of his late application, he did not visit the institution before the start of term. This meant that at the beginning of induction week he arrived at the university for the first time, moved into student halls, and had to find his way around an unfamiliar city.

Mark tells how:

> *... we were getting ready to move in and we hadn't even seen the place. I hadn't seen the university, I didn't know where it was. It was like the first day, I had the car but ... the student flats I was in were ... two and a half miles from the university. So it was like where do I go, it was right on the outskirts. I knew it was in the city centre somewhere, but I didn't know where to go at all. ... And I didn't know about how far I would have to walk.*

Because Mark had not visited the university before he started and had not discussed his needs with anyone, he found his first week very difficult. He depended on his car to get to university but found it particularly difficult to find places to park:

> *... it was hard getting used to just staying on my own, you know, but then having to deal with the extra walking and I didn't have a parking space reserved for me, so I was having to park at the front of the university if there was space, but usually there wasn't or this wee side road and try and park on there and walk up to the university. But it meant a lot of hassle ... first thing in the morning. And if I was due in at nine then it would be really, really busy ... the first week was ... really bad.*

He was also finding it stressful driving in city traffic after only recently passing his test. He says he really did not enjoy that first week. He was aware that other students were exploring the city, but he was using all his energy just trying to get to formal induction events. He describes finding his way to one event on Tuesday of induction week:

> *I had to park the car just near the university because I didn't know where [it] was but I could see other people going there, so I thought well I'll just walk because it can't be very far from the university. But then it was away down in the city centre ... they have a pedestrian bit where you can't get the car anyway. To a normal person it wouldn't be really far I suppose but it was a bit of a struggle and then I had all the way to come back afterwards to get to the car again. I was really, really tired but I knew that that was just a one off thing, so I wouldn't have to do that every day ... but then in the afternoon they had other induction things. I was sure I couldn't make it there that day, I was tired.*

A few days into his first week he spoke to one of the residence wardens, who suggested that he speak to one of the counsellors, which he did. She arranged for him to use a parking space in the staff car park, and gave him a key to a goods lift in one part of the building, in case the main lift was not working or was full. The parking space, in particular made a big difference.

He says with hindsight, that it would have been better if he had visited beforehand. Before he came he had assumed that the transition to university would be similar to the transition from primary school to secondary school. He had found getting around at secondary school more difficult because he had to move from one classroom to another every 45 minutes, but he had adjusted to that. In fact he found getting around university much more difficult than he had anticipated.

Discussion

Secondary education

Secondary education is beyond the scope of this research. However, it is noticeable from some of the students' accounts that there is a lack of awareness in some secondary schools of how to identify and support students with disabilities

and specific learning difficulties. Students with dyslexia, in particular, reported having negative experiences and being 'written off' as academic 'no-hopers' by their schools.

Pre-entry guidance

While a few of the students had received support and guidance on applying to higher education, others had not. Improving the availability of pre-entry guidance may well encourage more students with disabilities to enter higher education.

Pre-entry procedures

Formal pre-entry procedures now exist in most higher education institutions. A formal assessment of needs and visit to the institution prior to entry help to ensure that appropriate support is in place for new students as soon as possible. Not all students who are entitled to support go through these procedures at the moment, however, and students do 'slip through the net'. There are several reasons for this.

- Some students started their courses before these procedures were put in place.
- The procedures rely on students declaring disabilities, medical conditions, learning difficulties or mental health difficulties on UCAS forms, so late applicants and non-UCAS applicants will not be picked up by this system.
- Some students choose not to disclose disabilities because they believe they will be disadvantaged in some way. They are usually not aware that they may be entitled to support.
- Some students develop disabilities or identify existing disabilities post-entry.
- Some students do not apply the categories on the UCAS form to themselves.

Informing students of entitlement

This raises issues for institutions of how best to publicise the services and facilities available and, in particular, how to inform those students who may benefit from additional support of what is available.

Disclosure

Increasing numbers of students are telling universities about their disabilities, however, there are still those that do not disclose because they believe it will disadvantage them. The message that it is safe to disclose is getting through to more and more students, but there is still a way to go before all students feel that this is a positive option.

4: Academic Matters

In this chapter we discuss a range of issues to do with the students' academic experiences. These include their encounters with academic staff and the ways in which departments vary in the extent to which they are helpful. We describe a number of arrangements which have been made to cater for the students, and their feelings about these. The idea of the 'level playing field for all students' emerges as important, and we end the chapter by discussing some of the implications for the institutions of what the students have said.

Experiences with academic staff

Several students described very good experiences with staff in their academic departments. Many staff have positive attitudes towards students with disabilities, but may not have relevant knowledge or experience to back that up. Staff seem to be particularly ill-informed about dyslexia and ME. In a small number of cases, students have encountered negative attitudes towards their disability.

Good experiences and variation between departments

Mike visited and negotiated his needs before he started his course. One member of staff in each department is designated the disability contact and he informed all Mike's lecturers of his particular needs before Mike arrived. Right from his first day, large print copies of handouts were provided:

> *... from the first day I got here the introductory talks, the introduction to the course, that sort of thing, everything to do with that was large print. ... [the disability contact] knew me already from having met me before so he actually found me. He didn't call out my name in the middle of ... 350 students in the lecture theatre. He actually came up and looked through the crowds and found me and handed me the notes personally, which was good. You know, it saved being singled out on the very first day ...*

He was also loaned a tape recorder and laptop by the university until his DSA money came through. If any lecturer forgets or does not know about his needs, Mike says he feels able to ask because a clear agreement was made at that preliminary meeting about what the department would provide:

> *There's no point in just putting up with it not being done when it was arranged before I got here in first year. And if it doesn't get done then I know who to see to get it sorted.*

The disability co-ordinator at Mike's institution explains that Mike has had such good experiences with his department because the disability contact is very knowledgeable and committed. A student in a different department could not be assured of the same good treatment. Some disability contacts volunteered to take on the role, others were just told they would do it. This tends to affect their level of commitment to the job.

Jim has always had very positive experiences with his lecturers:

> *They have been extremely helpful in providing things ... they are very helpful and understanding in general with things ... They tend to provide them whenever they possibly can.*

This is at least in part because most of the departmental staff have had experience of teaching a blind student before. This previous student was particularly vocal and politically active and he paved the way for students with disabilities in the department and the university.

The staff in Andrew's department were initially anxious about him joining the course, mainly because they were concerned about the health and safety implications of a blind student studying ceramics. Now they are very supportive towards him:

> *... they are all really, really good. They always say can you manage that Andrew? ... [the head of department] is like brilliant, he really takes care of me when he is there. They are really approachable, it's quite a close knit department, we all get on quite well, I think.*

Catherine has always had very positive experiences in her department and this is largely due to the approach of the course leader. He is interested in all the students on his course. He operates an open-door policy, which means that any student can come to him if they want to talk something over. He keeps an eye on how they are all doing and picks up if a student is not attending or if they seem to be having problems. He sees students with disabilities as students first. The course leader said:

> *My reaction to anybody like that is as far as I'm concerned they're not disabled. If they have a problem we will help them. We don't treat [Catherine] any differently from anybody else ... My perception of it is that [students] only become special needs when the special need arises. We treat them just as ordinary people.*

Katy now has a good relationship with the staff in her department. However, this has taken a while to develop. It has come about, at least in part, because a senior member of staff in the department has personal experience of ME. One member of staff argued that extra time in exams would give her an unfair advantage, because students with ME can have good days sometimes. The senior member of staff was able to set this lecturer straight. Katy wondered:

> *... if I was in that department and a prominent member of staff was not in that situation would I be getting the same treatment? – it's very questionable. This is working fine for me but it's not really any official policy, it's not something someone in some other department's going to get, you know, it happens to have worked that way.*

On the whole, the staff in her department are now very supportive. If she needs to miss lectures because of ill-health or medical consultations, they are usually understanding. If she needs an extension on a piece of work, they no longer necessarily require her to provide a doctor's note.

Richard has encountered very different attitudes towards dyslexia from different university departments. He believes that he failed one of his first year courses because that particular department refused to take his dyslexia into consideration when marking his work. He approached the lecturers in question and tried to explain his difficulties to them. They were very dismissive, however, simply telling him to use a spell-checker. As a first year student, it was a daunting prospect to challenge the department and Richard eventually resigned himself to the situation, making up the shortfall in his credits in a different subject.

In stark contrast, Richard has encountered a very positive attitude towards dyslexia in a different department. This is because one of the senior members of staff is very sympathetic and knowledgeable about dyslexia. Several members of her family are dyslexic and she has an in-depth understanding of the different ways in which dyslexia can manifest itself. She double-marks all scripts from dyslexic students to make sure that they are being fairly assessed. Also, in certain exams, dyslexic students are allowed to express their ideas in the form of notes rather than a structured essay.

Difficulties with staff

Not all staff are always helpful. Sandra has had difficulties with one or two members of staff. One lecturer refused point blank to wear her radio mike. She says she was taken aback by this:

> *You think what am I going to do, he's not going to wear it, what am I going to do?*

After a few minutes, he changed his mind and came over and asked her why she wanted him to wear it. She says she felt really uncomfortable having to explain that she is deaf in front of the whole class:

> *With 150 people you're sitting there and I'm sure my face went red. I didn't look round, I thought if I look round everybody's going to be sitting looking at me. I could just have ran out the room, but then I would have gained nothing by that. It just made me angry and hurt ... I mean I thought God, have I got to do this in every one of these lectures? ... one day he'll wear it the next day he won't wear it.*

Sometimes staff are well-intentioned but behave inappropriately. During one tutorial, one of Sandra's lecturers repeatedly exhorted the students to speak up, speak more clearly or even to shout at each other. This was undoubtedly well-intentioned, but was unhelpful and inappropriate. Sandra needs to see people's faces so that she can lip-read. Increasing the volume of speech makes little difference to her understanding. Sandra likes the lecturer and finds it hard to tell him he is getting it wrong because she knows his intention is to be helpful.

Zoë had a bad experience in the first year with one of her lecturers. She repeatedly explained to the lecturer in question that she was dyslexic, but found that he was not taking this into consideration in marking her work. She had not had her formal assessment and did not know exactly what she could attribute to dyslexia, so did not feel able to argue her case from an informed standpoint. This experience contributed to her deciding to seek clear information about dyslexia and getting a formal assessment. She says that generally staff do not have a negative attitude towards dyslexia. The problem is that they usually do not know very much about it.

Lisa had a bad experience with one of her tutors when he found out about her dyslexia. She had had her formal assessment at this point and believed that all her tutors had been officially informed. This tutor, however, knew nothing about it until he was told by her class teacher on placement. He was taken by surprise and, Lisa believes, he lowered one of her grades because of it. Since this experience, Lisa tries not to draw attention to her dyslexia.

Alternative academic arrangements

Most institutions have procedures set up for granting alternative exam arrangements to students who need them. Most of the students have had no trouble getting appropriate arrangements made for their exams, but a few have had one or two difficulties because of the logistics of having different arrangements to most other students.

Most of the students in the project are entitled to extra time in exams, which allows them to stretch, rest, read the questions a few times or use appropriate equipment, depending on their particular needs. Some are allowed to use computers rather than handwriting and some take their exams in separate rooms.

Richard has found his extra time unusable because he usually takes his exams in the same hall as everyone else. The exams are timetabled closely together, so students with extra time are not only disturbed when people are leaving the hall, but also when a new group is coming in. Once, in an attempt to minimise this disruption, students with extra time were instructed to sit together on the stage. This idea was well-intentioned but unfortunately involved the use of a large sign instructing dyslexic students to sit on the stage. Some of the students complained about this as they felt that it drew unnecessary attention to their dyslexia.

Catherine is allowed to use her laptop in a separate room. During her first exam she used the computer room, but was distracted by someone lecturing in the room next door. She says she got very anxious and finally walked out:

> *Well I got, I don't know, I think I was tense and I was in the computer room and there was someone lecturing in the next room and I think, because I was tense, I lost my train of thought and it really got to me and I was like I can't go on, and they actually got ... [a friend] to come and try and calm me down and get me to go back in, but I just couldn't. I ended up saying I can't go back in, but I passed the exam.*

Her course leader was prepared to let her go back in and take as long as she needed on that occasion. His attitude towards exams is that all students should be provided with the conditions they need to be able to express themselves.

Formal procedures for notifying academic staff of students' needs in their departments usually exist and work well. However, supplying formal notification does not necessarily guarantee that students will receive appropriate provision. All of Richard's departments were officially informed that he had dyslexia at the beginning of his first year. This in itself was not enough to prevent him from failing one of his courses because, he believes, the department refused to take his dyslexia into account when marking his work.

The 'level playing field'

Most of the students were positive about the provision that they do receive. Most liked having their own equipment, provided through the DSA, and believed that any additional support they received, such as enlarged handouts or extra time, simply gave them the same opportunities as other students.

The students definitely do not want to be given advantages over other students, however. Recently, a well-meaning senior academic at Richard's university proposed that students with dyslexia should be given compensatory marking. The members of the dyslexia support group voted unanimously against it. Richard explained:

> *When the option of having the unlevelled playing field was put forward to us, we were going to get some compensatory marking ... we students said no, we're not going to have it, we're not going to tilt the playing field in our favour ... If you were dyslexic you were going to get an extra few percent put on. We had our meeting and nobody in the society wanted to have this ... well you didn't really get a proper degree yourself did you and you sort of end up getting little extra marks because you're dyslexic. People don't like that ... we want to be marked on the work that we do – not for the work that we haven't done. We just want people to be able to read it and not penalise us for it.*

Instead the members of the group are fighting for 'consideration stickers' to be put onto their anonymous exam scripts. These would inform markers that the writer was dyslexic and ask that they take this into consideration. The students feel this would help to ensure that they are not penalised for dyslexic errors. The university senior management, however, are against this because they believe it would identify students to markers.

Jim believes that the current level of provision simply provides him with the same opportunities as everyone else. He has 24 hour access to his computer in the visual impairment unit, which means, like any other student, he can work when it suits him. What he gets (handouts on disk, a more specific reading list, voice software on computer) only allows him access to the same material as every other student in a different format. Nothing he gets provides him with any advantage. A proposal was put forward at his university that disabled students could have lectures relayed to them over the internet. He and other disabled students strongly resisted this, however, because they did not want to be segregated from the other students in this way.

Lillian likes having extra time and being able to do her exams on a computer. These arrangements allow her to stretch and prevent her muscles from going into spasm. She does her exams in a computer lab with other students with alternative exam arrangements and says she does not feel segregated by this set-up.

Students do have the option of refusing support if they feel it would separate them too much from other students. Lisa does not want any kind of different treatment. She believes she would not get this anywhere else:

> *I don't want to be made into a special case, I wouldn't like to be given special treatment because that isn't realistic. You are not going to get that when you are working or when you are doing things for yourself. Basically ... I would rather that everything was marked by the same criteria as everybody else because that's what is going to happen in the real world.*

Katy takes her extra time, which she uses to rest during exams, but she chooses not to take her exams in a separate room. She says she prefers to do things in the same way as other students as far as possible. She believes that letting students choose what provision they accept is crucial:

> *I think ... it should be recognised that the person with the problem will very often be the person who will know best for themselves. They might not have*

> *thought of all the options that are being presented to them and therefore they should have all the options presented to them. But just because we can do this and we can do that and we can do the next thing ... you shouldn't feel pressured into it because it's available. If it doesn't feel right to them it's probably not right to them.*

She lives on a corridor with other students with additional support needs. She says, she can see how this might be seen as segregationist, but she has found talking to the other students a useful source of information:

> *I suppose if you're ... living in halls with other students, particularly the likes of where we are ... where in that particular corridor everyone has a problem. There are some people with disabilities who would argue strenuously against being put in a situation like that, you're being segregated. You're not really. It suits all of us this year and you do find out things because you're talking to other people who have problems too ... so you learn from other people by having that contact.*

Discussion

Variation between departments

While some students have had very good experiences in their academic departments, at the moment, provision can vary greatly from department to department within one institution. Students' experiences depend to a great extent on the attitude, level of experience and knowledge of the staff they come into contact with. Where staff are well-informed, this is often because of personal experience or interest in a particular disability or because they have had previous experience of a student with a particular disability, rather than because of any institutional policy or training.

Difficult experiences

Difficult experiences for students come about where academic staff are ill-informed, insensitive or do not understand the needs of students with different disabilities. Making assumptions about what a student needs without checking this out can also lead to inappropriate actions on the part of staff.

It can have serious implications when staff fail to recognise or take students' needs into account: students' grades are affected and they may even fail courses. The numbers of students declaring dyslexic difficulties are steadily increasing and many staff lack knowledge of how to respond appropriately to their needs.

Alternative exam arrangements

Most institutions have procedures set up for granting alternative exam arrangements. When students have different exam arrangements, however, there is a risk that they may feel segregated from their peers. Most students were happy with their exam arrangements and were clear that they only provided them with the same opportunities as other students.

Policy conflicts

Policies such as anonymous marking of exam scripts may be in conflict with policies aimed at the equitable treatment of students with disabilities. Staff need to know whether students have dyslexia if they are to take it into account when marking scripts. However, this may then identify students and negate the effects of anonymous marking. Students with disabilities may produce scripts using computers which also makes it difficult to retain anonymity.

Equity and choice

Students were prepared to accept a degree of segregation, such as separate exam accommodation, where they felt it provided them with equal opportunities. Students were strongly against being given advantages because of their disabilities, being unnecessarily segregated from their peer group and having unnecessary attention drawn to their disabilities. Students want to be informed of their entitlements but ultimately retain the right to refuse provision if they do not feel comfortable with it.

5: Relating to the Institution

In this chapter we hear more about how the students relate to the institutions in which they are studying. They tell us something about the ways in which they have gone about getting their needs recognised and met, and we learn about their successes and failures. They discuss how much they feel that they can, or should, tell their institutions about their disabilities and how institutions can get feedback from the students about the facilities available to them and the ways they are treated. Finally we note the students' differing views on the words used to describe disabilities, and try to draw some general lessons from what we have heard.

Approach to getting needs met

Students are very different in the approaches they take to discussing their needs with the institution. Some students are proactive. This is often because they have received some kind of provision at school and know that they may be entitled to additional support. Some students, however, do not know that they may be entitled to anything or that support is available. Others may fear they will be disadvantaged if they ask for anything or disclose a disability. Others know they could get support but choose not to take it because they want to be treated like other students. Even when needs have been discussed, students may still feel uncomfortable about asking for something, especially if it will affect the whole class.

Lillian was proactive about negotiating her needs. She wanted to satisfy herself that her present university was accessible before she started her course. The welfare adviser at her FE college told her about her entitlements through the DSA and she liaised with the disability co-ordinator throughout the summer before she started her course to put together her application and discuss her needs. She went to her department early on and explained her needs to them:

> *It was sort of 'I'm going to tell you this so that it'll help you to help me if I need the help'.*

When Richard first arrived at university he pre-empted any institutional procedure by going directly to the disability co-ordinator and asking what he should do about his dyslexia. She arranged for him to be re-assessed, since his last assessment had taken place a few years before. She also told him about the dyslexia support group and his entitlements through the DSA.

Richard is very open about his dyslexia. He is pro-active in talking to his tutors about it and asking for what he needs:

> *My view is they can only say 'no'. It's like going to the bank and getting an overdraft.*

In the first week of every new term, he goes to all his lecturers and asks whether he can have copies of overheads and handouts in advance. Most of his lecturers are amenable to this request.

Jim is clear about what he needs from lecturers and has no hesitation in asking for it. At the start of each term, he waits behind after the first lecture in each course and has a word with the lecturer. He explains that he will need any handouts or overheads on disk. He will also need lecturers to explain any visual aids that they

use during their teaching. If the lecturers cannot manage to give him copies of notes on disk, he takes paper copies and gets them read or scans them. Lecturers may ask questions about what he needs from them. He usually says if there is anything he needs he will ask for it.

Even when an agreement has been made that a department will provide certain things for a particular student, this sometimes does not happen. If Mike's lecturers do not provide him with enlarged handouts, he simply tells them of his needs. Because a clear agreement was made before he started his course about what the department would provide, he feels entitled to ask if he does not get it.

Because of their experiences studying at school, Jim and Catherine were both clear about what they would need to enable them to study in higher education. They also knew that they may be entitled to support and were used to receiving it. This put them in a good position when it came to negotiating their needs with their institutions. In contrast, Katy arrived at university with no idea that she may be entitled to any kind of support. The last time she had studied she had not had ME and she had no knowledge of support available. She also had no idea what she might need to help her with her studies. She believed that she would just have to deal with any difficulties that arose by herself:

> *I have to say there is a world of a difference if you have had a disability for a long time or life-long, you know how to find out about these things. If you have never been in that situation before, as effectively I hadn't, I had never done anything with an illness to impair it particularly, and if you have not been in that situation before you do not know what sources of help you should be looking for, where you should be looking for them, but the most important thing is I think ... you don't know what's available, you don't know what you're entitled to ask for or not entitled to ask for, should expect or not expect.*

She did not know whether it was appropriate to talk to her lecturers about her health problems or not in the first year. Now, having gone through the system, Katy knows what is appropriate and who to talk to about what:

> *... my health is causing these problems, do you go and tell your tutor about these things? Can you tell your tutor about these things. Should you tell your tutor about these things? Things like that, but you're not only new to your illness you're new to academic life and you don't know what you should be telling people and not telling them ... There's so much you don't know that now you take for granted because you've been through the system and you've learned and you know, you just automatically know what to do and what not to do. But when you're in first year you don't and if you've never had to deal with a health issue before, you really don't, you really, really don't know what to do.*

Mark had his mobility problems at school, but he had not received any support because of it, he had simply coped with the demands of getting around school by himself. He assumed that university would present him with the same kind of challenge and did not seek any kind of support:

> *I sort of took it to be that ... when I came here ... this was the way it was and I'm just going to have to adapt to the situation really.*

The university counsellor arranged for him to have a parking space at the university and suggested that he could use a more accessible room for exams:

> *I wouldn't have gone up to her and said will I be able to get these things. It's like she said that to me, and so like great, I'll take it really.*

Mark also, however, believed that identifying himself at university as having additional needs would disadvantage him later when he came to apply for a job:

> *You see it was really my physiotherapist that I had when I was younger, she had told me about when ... I don't know if it was true, but I suppose it was, about how somebody that she was giving physiotherapy to, she went to university and she put down on an application form ... she needed such and such and such and such because of her disability ... but she was saying when she applied for a job ... her employers said well because you needed all of these things at university ... you won't be able to handle the stairs or whatever at the business. So it meant ... she was limited in the amount of jobs that she could get. So I've been told anyway. So then that's why when I applied I just said I've got this disability but I'll just have to cope really ... which is what I said, but it was a bit harder than I thought it would be.*

He has now changed his mind. He thinks that realistically, he may not be able to do some jobs anyway if they did involve a lot of moving around. He now believes that it is better to ask for what he needs, because it is not actually that much, rather than expending a lot of his energy on moving around.

Sandra's speech deafness had not been identified at school and she had learned to cope with it by herself. She assumed that she would just do the same at university. She only heard about the disability co-ordinator at her university in second year from a fellow student. That is when she approached them to find out if she was entitled to any support.

The disability co-ordinator helped her to get a radio mike through the DSA. She asks her lecturers to wear it and it does help:

> *I found, oh gosh, it was like if you wear glasses and take them off and put them back on again, then suddenly you see things have got straight edges ... So I was quite surprised, although I still don't get all the lecture.*

She is aware that there are other students with hearing difficulties who are also struggling along without any support:

> *I know a few people who have difficulty hearing ... at the university and a few of them have got hearing aids, a few don't, but they have difficulty at lectures and I have said to them why don't you speak to the lecturer, why don't you say you can't hear ... these are people who are not classed as having special needs because they're not getting equipment. ... Their particular level of deafness doesn't warrant a radio mike or something else, it doesn't warrant it so they're not heard, they've got no-one to go to. ... I said to one lady who wears a hearing aid, I told her why don't you come and see ... [the disability co-ordinator]... 'oh, I'll manage'. And that is basically the attitude.*

Zoë did not disclose her dyslexia at first because she thought she would be labelled as stupid. She could see no advantage in disclosing it. She had noticed the information about the DSA on the grant application form, but had not realised that students with dyslexia might be able to benefit from it. Not disclosing was partly to do with being 17 and worrying what people would think of her. She says that as she got older, she stopped being concerned about this:

> *Now I couldn't care less who knows. It doesn't bother me but then I was only 17 or 18 which is quite young and I didn't want to be labelled ...*

Now, she writes that she is dyslexic on her exam scripts, in case the formal memo informing the examiners has not reached them.

Lisa prefers not to draw attention to her dyslexia. This is partly because she had a bad experience with one of her tutors when he did find out and partly through embarrassment:

> *I like to be able to put everything into a computer before somebody else sees it. Unless it is somebody like ... my flat mate because I really don't mind her laughing at my spelling mistakes but with anyone else I do get very embarrassed about it.*

She also does not want to be treated differently by the institution because of it. She has a computer which was funded through the DSA, and is entitled to extra time in exams and extensions for essays and assignments. However, she prefers not to ask for these as she believes she will not receive this kind of treatment in the 'real world'.

Andrew wants to work as far as possible in the same way as any other student. This has meant that he has not always had the help he is entitled to particularly with written work:

> *I just want to get along as normal as any other student can, so a lot of times I hold back from saying things until it has got too late. At the start I should have said look I really need someone to help me do research and that is happening now that I am halfway through third year. If I said that right at the start I would have had less problems in writing essays etc. At the end of the day I have done ... fine but it could have been made easier if I had gone ahead and said.*

With hindsight, he realises that this approach has made things difficult for him:

> *I think that's part of my problems I've always tried to be as mainstream as I possibly can and do things as independently as possible. That's been my downfall ... I've been reluctant to go and ask for help.*

He has now been persuaded by the disability co-ordinator and his tutor to use the non-medical help aspect of the DSA to employ a post-graduate student to help him do research for his dissertation.

The student will accompany him to interviews, help him find relevant passages in books, put them onto tape and word-process his written work. This set up has only started recently but seems to be working well so far:

> *... it was really good when we were to hand in the first 1000 words, it was the very first time in my history at this college that I've actually handed in a piece of written work on time without an extension. And it's really help that I could have got from first year onwards but I think it's just been wanting to be independent that I've managed so far just to sort of struggle through. But like now I think ... because it's the dissertation, it's just much more important that I take advantage of this.*

Even when a student's needs have been discussed with the institution, there are sometimes difficulties. Students may find it difficult to ask for something if it affects the whole class or are put in the position of repeatedly having to ask for something.

Mark's tutor suggested that a room could be changed if Mark was having difficulty accessing it. If Mark had asked for it to be changed, it would have affected the whole class and he did not feel comfortable about doing this:

> *Well ... [the course leader] was asking if, the class I had in first year ... was okay. I said I'd try it a few times like for the distance it is, but I managed it okay. It was a bit of an effort, but I didn't really want to get the whole class moved just because like I had to put in that extra little bit of effort. It was a bit*

much. So I thought no, because it wasn't too bad. But I would have preferred it to be closer of course, but it wasn't too bad.

Sandra generally will go to members of staff and ask for what she needs. She will tell them if they speak too fast for her, or if they turn away and she cannot see them. Most are helpful and will give her copies of the lecture notes if she asks for them. She says she would have found it more difficult to do this when she was younger:

There are times and you think God if I'd been younger when that happened I probably would have backed off, whereas when you're older and have a bit more experience you're ... a wee bit more confident to go in and try and tackle it.

She sometimes gets fed up with repeatedly having to remind people to look at her or uncover their mouths when they speak in tutorials. Lecturers sometimes look a bit harassed when they have to clip on her radio mike. This can get to her. She says she does get tired of having to ask people to do things for her so that she can hear:

I sometimes think I'm asking too much and I don't want to impose ... oh God, me again, ... and it does, it can get embarrassing because I don't want to do it. And that holds me back a lot of times.

Katy has had difficulties persuading the accommodation office of her needs. She has told them clearly what she needs and still been given inappropriate accommodation. This has put her in the position of repeatedly having to tackle this situation. She describes how this has been a drain on her energy and an ongoing cause of stress. She says sometimes she simply does not have the energy to deal with this.

Feedback to the institution

Some of the students have official roles through which they provide feedback to their institutions. They may be officers of the students' association, or sit on committees dealing with disability issues. Students who do not have official roles will be providing feedback to their institutions in some form by simply discussing their experiences and needs with the disability co-ordinator or with their lecturers. It can be a daunting prospect for an individual student to complain, if he or she feels unfairly treated.

As equal opportunities officer for the students' association and previously as disabilities officer, Lillian has a high profile in the university and has been influential in getting things changed. Apart from her role on the students' association, she has also been asked to sit on a recently formed university-wide welfare committee. She says that she feels this is a forum where things will get done because there are influential people on the committee.

Lillian believes that, when she challenges a decision or a procedure, her arguments carry more weight because she is disabled herself:

... it strikes me that the most that's been done for disabled students has always been done when there's actually been somebody with a disability active in ... (the students' association). The fact that we've got disabilities as well seems to give more clout to our arguments.

She says that having the new legislation behind her also adds weight to her arguments:

> *When you start putting the pressure on you make people in authority feel uncomfortable and now that the new legislation is starting to increase disability awareness, they know that under certain aspects of the new disabled law they are going to have to change things. They are starting to move.*

She has different strategies for getting things done. As an officer of the students' association, she can go directly to the head of a department to discuss a problem. When she asks for things to be changed, she does not always get a positive response immediately:

> *I wouldn't say they respond positively every time, but they don't respond negatively. I've got a reputation that precedes me: 'look, you don't say no to her on disability issues'. Because if they do, if they start being difficult, I'll start pulling in the big wigs to support me.*

One university decision meant that certain doors were locked in the evenings for safety reasons. This effectively made the building inaccessible to Lillian if she wanted to go to a students' association meeting. She wrote to the student newspaper to make her point and the decision was reversed within 48 hours.

Richard is on the committee of the dyslexia support group. The group is a forum where students can seek support and share experiences with other dyslexic students. It has also now evolved into an advisory group for the university. Any changes in policy or procedure to do with dyslexia are usually put to the group for feedback:

> *It has a voice I don't know if it has any power. It's the only way you can gauge what is going on, also you can find out which departments are friendly which ones aren't.*

He jokes that it is difficult to get anyone to take the minutes at the meetings:

> *It is a case of at the dyslexia support group – "Is anybody going to take the minutes?" [laughing] "Anybody at all ...?".*

Richard has also recently been elected onto the student representative council (SRC) as equal opportunities officer. He will put together an equal opportunities policy for the SRC and sit on a university committee on the issue. The current university policy is 10 years old and does not mention students, so there are plans to update it. He believes the SRC have influence but no power. He also works with someone on the SRC who sits on university committees so he may have influence through this person.

Mike has been invited by the disability co-ordinator to sit on groups concerned with disability policy and procedures within the university. He and a small number of other students are there to give the student perspective. He has also been asked to walk around one of the main university buildings giving feedback about its accessibility. As a result of that, ramps and steps have been painted with yellow stripes to make them more visible. The departmental disability contact says that Mike has been very helpful to them in these ways.

It can be very difficult for an individual student to complain against a member of staff, if he or she has had a bad experience. Sandra had difficulties with one lecturer who initially refused to wear her radio mike. She also found him

aggressive towards her on another occasion. She spoke to her adviser of studies and to the disability co-ordinator about it. At the end of the day, however, it is difficult for an individual student to lodge a complaint against a lecturer:

> *I don't really want to make waves. I don't want to make enemies. I said well, I don't know what to do. I said I'm speaking to you (her adviser of studies) just now, I'm hurt and I'm angry, let me go away, let me think about it and re-evaluate how I'm feeling ... and I spoke to ... [the disability co-ordinator] and I could see, I saw her point of view. I mean if I don't do anything about it there is nothing she can do about it, and I already know that and I can appreciate the frustration she must feel. But then, I was hoping for the same appreciation on how I felt and she did, she understood. I don't want my name up there emblazoned here comes the trouble-maker, I don't want that. I mean I want life to be smooth.*

In the end, a general note was sent asking them to wear radio mikes if requested to do so by students. This was a general solution which did not involve Sandra being singled out. Sandra decided, however, to drop that course anyway.

When Richard failed one of his first year courses because, he believes, the department refused to recognise his dyslexia, it was a daunting prospect for him to challenge the department. He eventually resigned himself to the situation, making up the shortfall in his credits in a different subject:

> *I very strongly felt that I should have appealed. I eventually thought no, it's not worth it, the ... department is a completely lost hope anyway. I did speak about it at one point to my faculty adviser ... but by then I just wasn't bothered but had gone right off ... [the subject].*

Zoë did complain to her head of department about one member of staff who made inappropriate remarks to her. She did not feel in a position to argue with him when, she believes, he marked her down for what she felt were dyslexic mistakes, because she was not sure what she could reasonably attribute to dyslexia.

Disclosure

Some of the students choose not to disclose their disabilities in some situations. This is because they believe they may meet with a negative reaction or that they may be disadvantaged in some way.

Zoë could see no advantage in disclosing her dyslexia in the beginning, in fact she thought that people would label her as stupid. Lisa chooses not to draw attention to her dyslexia partly because she had a bad experience with one of her tutors when he found out and partly because she is embarrassed about it.

Richard on the other hand is very open about his dyslexia. He jokes that he usually mentions it at every opportunity. He is aware, however, that other students are not as open as he is, because they are afraid that they will be disadvantaged later:

> *They say I don't really want them [the considerations]. It's not going to look very good on my degree or to put on my CV that I was dyslexic or whatever. I think more fool them really. The considerations are there and, if they are struggling through then they might as well try and use the system as it stands. Also we could use their advice on how to alter the system to make it slightly better.*

Sandra and Andrew have disabilities that are not visible. They have no outward signs of their disabilities and have learned strategies to compensate for them. Sandra's speech is faultless and she is adept at lip-reading and 'filling in the gaps' if she does not pick up everything that has been said. She does inform people about her deafness when it is necessary. Andrew has had mobility training and he uses his remaining vision to negotiate his environment apparently effortlessly. Andrew chooses not to tell everyone about his disability:

> *The librarians are really helpful ... not all of them are aware that I have a visual impairment, I don't really think it is obvious ... there are only a few people that really have to be aware I think. I don't think it is necessary to blast the information out ... The staff in the department are all aware. Sometimes they forget to tell visiting lecturers and sometimes, if it is relevant, I will have to say to them.*

Ultimately institutions have to respect a student's choice not to disclose a disability. However, institutions can look at how they can move closer towards creating an environment in which disclosure is a positive option. Increasing numbers of students are declaring disabilities and this suggests that information about the support available is filtering through. However, significant numbers still choose not to disclose because they fear negative consequences.

Institutions also need to consider whether it is appropriate to require students with some medical conditions to disclose where their health and safety might be at risk. A student counsellor in one university said:

> *Epilepsy and diabetes are the major two I think that go undisclosed, particularly epilepsy, I mean there's such a stigma still about that that, although we sort of try and delicately urge students to be open about it when they first come. I don't know that they do. And we're getting a bit more tough on that now because of the implications for residences and, you know, students in residence who might have an epileptic fit or a diabetic coma. I think there was a case ...(at another institution) of a student dying simply because no-one knew that he had diabetes and just thought he was having a long sleep and didn't go in and wake him up. So I think, you know, all universities are looking quite hard at those sort of issues at the moment and we certainly are working on a policy at the moment to try and avoid that kind of situation arising.*

Terminology

The students all have their own individual preferences about terminology describing disability, although most say they do not mind too much. Some dislike the term 'special needs' because they find it too vague, others prefer it because it sounds like it is a problem you can do something about. Some prefer to use words that are specific and clear to describe their disabilities, others prefer more general terms.

Jim does not really mind. The only word he dislikes is 'handicapped' because he feels it has negative connotations. He says he feels the debate about terminology seems dictated from outside and that most disabled students do not really mind. If they were offended by the way something was phrased, they would say something:

> *I see it as a political issue of something that's kind of always dictated from outside. The majority of disabled students that I know ... and I know quite a few of them, really don't care at all.*

Zoë does not mind too much. She prefers dyslexia to 'learning difficulties' because it is more specific. She finds 'special needs' too broad. Richard also prefers 'dyslexia', because, he says it is a tighter title. There is more chance of misunderstanding 'learning difficulties'. He, however, prefers 'special needs' to 'disabilities', because 'disabilities' sounds more final, 'special needs' sounds like you could do something about it.

Sandra prefers 'disadvantaged' to 'disabled'. Andrew prefers 'visually impaired' to 'blind':

> *I'd rather just be called visually impaired than registered blind. Although ... I do get about quite well and I am actually registered blind. But I'd rather just be called visually impaired, so many negative connotations around blindness, whereas ... visually impaired ... I think it's seen as much more acceptable. It doesn't sound as disabled as the word blind would.*

Mark does not mind too much, but prefers 'special needs' to 'disability'. Mike, on the other hand, does not like 'special needs', he says it is too vague. He prefers people to say what they mean:

> *Well I just wish people would come out and say it. Certain students are disabled. It's not somebody with special needs, I mean it's not like somebody who has a speech difficulty, they're not orally impaired, they've got a speech difficulty. This political correctness really, in some ways it annoys me actually because if you don't say what's meant then it can be very easily taken the wrong way. And that can cause bigger problems, it can mean that a student doesn't get what they need or they get the wrong sort of help or that sort of thing.*

The use of appropriate terminology is very important. One disability co-ordinator said there is not one neutral phrase which describes the service she offers and this causes problems. Her remit includes supporting students with dyslexia, medical conditions and mental health difficulties, but these students do not necessarily identify themselves as 'disabled' and might not therefore seek her support. The term 'special needs' is also problematic as it is regarded by some people as patronising.

Discussion

Reasons for not seeking support

The students were very different in their approach to getting their needs met. This depended to a large extent on their previous experiences. There are several reasons why students do not seek the support that they are entitled to.

- Students do not know that they are entitled to any additional support. This applies in particular to students who have recently become ill or disabled.
- They do not classify themselves as having 'special needs' or disabilities.
- They choose not to disclose disabilities because they believe they will be disadvantaged.
- They choose not to ask for support they are entitled to because they do not want to be treated differently.

Disclosure and choice

Ultimately institutions have to respect a student's choice not to disclose a disability or not to accept provision they are entitled to. However, institutions may consider requiring disclosure where a student's health and safety may be at risk. Also institutions should move towards creating an environment in which disclosure is a positive option for students.

Taking account of students' needs

When students have made their needs known to institutions, it is essential that those needs are then taken into account. Failures of communication within institutions and people forgetting disabled students' needs put students in the difficult position of repeatedly having to ask for what they need.

Lack of awareness and understanding amongst staff of the implications of different disabilities and medical conditions can lead to a student's needs being disregarded, even when the student has clearly stated them. For all students ongoing battles to convince staff of their needs can be stressful and exhausting. For students with ME, in particular, such battles use up energy that they could be using on their studies.

Student feedback

Institutions are seeking student input into the development of policies and procedures affecting them. Using student groups to express views to institutions can feel safer for individual students especially if they wish to inform the institution of a problem. Where a student feels wronged, it can be a daunting prospect for an individual student to make a complaint. Finding general solutions to problems highlighted by individual students can avoid students feeling singled out as trouble-makers.

Terminology

The students all had different preferences about terminology describing disability. If it becomes necessary to refer to a student's impairment or illness, it is important to ask the student which words they prefer to use.

6: Access, Mobility and Transport

In this chapter we look at how the students cope with problems of access, mobility and transport.

Access for students in wheelchairs is improving gradually in most institutions. However, because existing inaccessible buildings are being adapted, the result is sometimes not as good as if the building had been designed to be accessible from the outset. Some buildings and departments remain inaccessible, because there is no way to adapt them or because adaptations are competing for general institutional funds.

Students with mobility difficulties may rely on cars for transport to and around their institutions. This means that being able to park near to the institution is a necessity. Designating parking spaces for disabled drivers does not necessarily guarantee that non-disabled drivers will leave those spaces free. The cost of running a car can be expensive, especially if the student needs to use a car with automatic transmission or if the car requires adaptation.

Students with visual impairments rely on public transport to get around. They may have had mobility training or use other strategies to help them negotiate their environments.

Lillian uses her wheelchair, sticks and her car to get around at university. If her classes are in different buildings, she drives from one to another. She can access the buildings she uses in her wheelchair, because they have ramps. However, once inside a building there are numerous closed fire doors to get through. She can push doors open with her foot, but pulling doors open is a trickier process. Sometimes she needs to open both sides of a double door in order to get her wheelchair through. Lillian uses the non-medical help allocation of her DSA to employ a fellow student for 9 hours per week to help her to get around. This is particularly helpful if she has classes scheduled consecutively. Depending on their respective timetables, however, her helper is not always available when Lillian needs him.

Lillian is reliant on her car for transport to university. She currently has her own car, which is an adapted hand-control automatic. Because Lillian relies on her car for transport, she also relies on being able to park it close to the university buildings near to ramped sections of pavement. There are a number of parking spaces around the university designated for disabled drivers. However, these spaces are often taken by non-disabled drivers. If she catches anyone parking in a disabled space, Lillian confronts the person on the spot. She has also alerted the relevant university department about this problem and they paste stickers onto offending vehicles.

Parts of the library are currently inaccessible to her. There is a lift to the upper floors, but it is too small for some wheelchairs. Lillian can use it but has to reverse out of it because it is not big enough for her to turn her chair around inside. Once upstairs, the aisles between the bookshelves are too narrow for her wheelchair, so if she wants to browse, she has to walk. She says it is too tiring for her to do this for very long. Another problem is that the photocopiers are too high for her to use.

She solves these problems by asking her helper to get books and photocopy them for her. She has found a way around these obstacles, but would like to be able to browse the shelves herself.

Mark finds walking tiring and tries to keep it to a minimum. He relies on his car to get to university and, once there, to get from building to building. He is allowed to park in a disabled parking space in the staff car park. He says he gets fed up with lecturers challenging him about this because they do not realise that he has been granted permission. He can use the 'pay and display' car park behind his flat for free. However because it is reasonably close to the city centre, it is often full. There is no designated disabled space and sometimes he has waited for up to half an hour to park.

He leases his car from Motability. It was initially expensive because he had to pay a large deposit and the cost of adapting the car. His weekly mobility allowance pays for the lease. He uses an automatic, which is more expensive to lease and run:

> *It's like the people that need the car most, they're having to pay the most, a lot, lot more.*

However, Mark believes that it is still cheaper for him to lease a car than it is to buy one because, by leasing, he does not have to pay the costs of insurance and maintenance.

Mike moved to a new city to start his degree and had to gradually build up a mental map of the area:

> *... whereas most people sort of remember where something is and where they are, they can work out just basically by remembering scenery, how to get between the two points, I have to actually create a complete map of the area in my head, work out exactly where I am and exactly where I want to go. It's very, very tedious. But I've been doing it since I was about 4 or 5 so ... in some ways it's automatic.*

Both Jim and Andrew have received mobility training. Jim visited his institution before he started his course and was trained with several other students by the Guide Dog's For The Blind Association.

Andrew received general mobility training before he did his Access course, and chose to do a course in a familiar place. Andrew's head of department at his further education college offered to visit the Scottish institution to discuss health and safety issues. He also suggested that they could consult the RNIB about adapting the physical environment to be safer and easier for Andrew to get around. As a result of this, obstacles such as pillars were painted with yellow and black stripes. The doors and walls were already painted in contrasting colours making them more visible:

> *Mobility is only a problem when you have just sort of arrived at an area for the one time. You just have to take your time walking about but because of my mobility training I know what to look out for. When you go to a place you just have to take your time and you know how to look out for obstacles as well, so it is not a problem.*

Discussion

Improving access

There is much scope for institutions to improve the accessibility of their buildings. Adapting buildings is often a costly business, however, and only one of many things competing for institutional funds. Adapting existing buildings usually produces an imperfect solution and even when the entrance to a building is made accessible for wheelchair users, obstacles may still remain inside, such as heavy fire doors or doorways that are too narrow.

Parking

For students who rely on cars for transport, the provision of a parking space near to the institution can be essential. However, awareness also needs to be raised amongst non-disabled drivers about this as there is no guarantee that they will leave designated spaces free.

Mobility training

Students with visual impairments may need mobility training before they begin their courses. Obstacles such as pillars and ramps can also be painted so that they become more clearly visible.

7: Types of Support

In this chapter we look at the various types of support which are available to students. We begin by discussing the use of information technology, then go on to look at finance and the Disabled Students Allowance. After this we discuss the sources of personal support which students turn to, and finally examine what the students had to tell us about incidences of depression and how they coped with that.

IT solutions

There are many different software packages available now for students with disabilities. Most of the students in the sample have their own computers bought with money from the DSA. All the students that have their own computers have found them very useful, and they appreciate having access to their own machines.

Both Lisa and Zoë have found that using computers to produce their assignments has improved their grades. Zoë uses standard word processing software on her computer that checks her spelling as she goes along. She believes that her marks have improved 10-15% since she has started using it. Lisa's computer checks spelling but also has a facility for reading words out. This is helpful as she sometimes misreads words. It also picks up phonetic spelling. She says it has been very useful and has made a big difference.

Packages with a voice synthesiser which can read out text or commands can be useful for students with dyslexia and for students with visual impairments. Jim's computer has a voice synthesiser. He can produce files in braille or ink print. This enables him to word process his work and to read handouts given to him on disk. Andrew also has a computer with a voice synthesiser which reads back what he types. This helps him to some extent with written work. Andrew has found it useful to have additional support with written work, however, and he has recently employed a post-graduate student to help him with his dissertation. She will accompany him to interviews, help him find relevant passages in books, put them onto tape and word process his written work.

The use of computers can be useful to students who have difficulty with handwriting. Mike has difficulty reading his own handwriting but can read enlarged text on a computer screen. He has a laptop computer which he uses to take notes in lectures and for assignments. He is entitled to use it in exams but tends not to because he actually prefers to write in exams, since he is used to doing this. Catherine also uses a laptop to take notes in lectures and for writing essays because typing is easier for her than writing. Unlike Mike she also uses it in exams. Katy also has difficulties with manual dexterity which affects her ability to hand-write and to type. Because of this she uses a voice-operated computer. Over time the computer can be trained to recognise the sound of one person's voice with increasing accuracy. She has had to learn to use it and this has taken a while. Like Mike, she prefers not to use it in exams because in a stressful situation, she feels happier writing by hand because she is used to that.

For students with mobility difficulties, having their own machines can reduce unnecessary travelling. Mark's computer is equipped with most of the software that he uses on his course. Lillian also has her own computer which she uses at home to word process assignments.

Richard does not have his own computer but there are four computers available for students with dyslexia at his university. They have software that suggests the next word in a sentence. Richard explains that the software has a limited dictionary, however, with no specialist vocabulary and no facility for adding to the dictionary, so the suggestions are often not relevant. For this reason and because these computers are only available between nine and five and are not linked to the network, Richard usually tends to use the standard computer facilities.

Simply providing students with computers and suitable software is not enough in itself. Students who receive computers need training and ongoing technical support. This is provided in some cases by information technology staff in institutions or by Access Centre staff. Students can claim for 10 hours training through the DSA, but they are not covered for ongoing technical support if anything goes wrong with their machines or if a software upgrade becomes appropriate.

The use of information technology can be one very helpful way in which students with disabilities can be supported in their studies. One disability co-ordinator voiced concern, however, that institutions might begin to see information technology as a sufficient means of supporting students with disabilities. She emphasised that students need various different kinds of support which may or may not include the use of information technology.

Finance

Like many students, several of the students in this sample are struggling financially. While this is not necessarily because of their disabilities, financial difficulties may be compounded by problems finding part-time or temporary work. The current level of student grant, in most cases, pays the rent and little else. Other sources of financial support include families, student loans, savings, overdrafts, trust funds and disability allowances from the government. One or two of the students have extra expenses because of their disabilities for which they are not receiving extra finance.

Mike is having financial difficulties. This is mainly because he does not have the option of staying at home during the holidays and has to find money to support himself out of term time. He gets a full grant, which just covers his term-time rent. He also gets disability living allowance, which pays the bills. He has taken his maximum entitlement to student loans and also has a sizeable overdraft. He tried to get a part-time job but was unsuccessful, he believes, because of his disability:

> *... being partially sighted doesn't help. In fact I've a feeling that that's one reason why my application to ... [company A] failed because that would have been a reasonable job. But they claim that they couldn't fit me in. My timetable, the hours, they couldn't fit me in around them.*

His financial situation is a source of stress and distraction:

> *... it's more the financial side of things. I mean academically if I sit down and just look over all the notes I can do the work, I know I can do the work. It's ... the work isn't actually that difficult aside from the fact that there's so much of it. But it's just all the other worries that I have on top of it remove all form of motivation.*

He has considered giving up many times:

> *There are times when I think I should just give this in and there are times when I think well why quit, I've been here nearly two years it will be one hell of a waste to quit now.*

He did get some money from the university Access fund which is helping him to get through to the end of the term, but realistically he still needs to find a job over the summer if he is to survive.

Lillian says that she just about manages financially. During the summer between her first and second years, she tried to get temporary work through several agencies. She was offered less than two days work even though she is an experienced secretary. Eventually she gave up and started doing voluntary work instead:

> *I can manage. And sometimes it gets really difficult. And it's partly because they cut my income support in relation to my grant and during the holidays I can't go out and get a job, which I was hoping to do in the summer but it didn't work out.*

Katy has managed to supplement her income with a small grant from a trust fund for books. When she was a part-time student and ineligible to apply for a grant, she went through a directory of grant-making bodies looking for sources of funding. Now that she is studying full-time, she has a grant and loans and is also in receipt of incapacity benefit.

Mark and Richard have extra expenses because of their disabilities for which they are receiving no extra funding. Mark relies on his car to get to university and petrol is a big expense for him. He has managed so far without taking a loan, because he has been using up his savings. Richard gets a full grant and has student loans, but he is very hard up. Because of his dyslexia, one of his major expenses is buying books. The books he needs are usually available only on short loan in the library, but this means he can only get them out for a few hours at a time and this is not long enough for him to read them. He has estimated that he spent £300 on books last year:

> *It is much better to have ... a copy you can get at at any time as opposed to just saying yes I will have that book between three and seven on Wednesday afternoon. You can have it between three and seven if you like but you can have it the whole night as well and for the rest of the term and it also means I also have the recommended texts for all my courses. I really can't afford to buy my own books but I'm going to have to. It means I can't drink as much in the term, I can't eat. It is also quite good because I can put post-it notes in books – a thousand bookmarks in this book. It means I don't have to look up the index every time I want to find something.*

Even though Gary is a post-graduate student, he is in receipt of a student grant from the SAAS (Students Awards Agency for Scotland). He had to put forward a strong case when he applied, arguing that he had not received a grant before. The

disability co-ordinator helped him to put this together. Because his application was successful he has also been able to apply for support with travelling and software through the DSA.

Some of the students are managing financially. Catherine gets support from her parents and has managed so far not to take out a loan. Andrew is comfortable financially. He gets a mature students' grant. His rent is cheap because he lives outside of the city. He gets a free public transport pass, so travel is free. Lisa gets a grant and a loan and has a part-time job. She says she manages. Zoë has worked part-time to supplement her grant and loans. Sandra gets a grant and is supported by her family.

The Disabled Students Allowance

The current model of provision is that students with disabilities are often eligible to apply for the disabled students' allowance (DSA). This allows them to purchase equipment and other resources or to employ helpers, depending on their needs. Because the students are equipped individually to meet their own needs, extra demands on their departments are often fairly minimal. All of the students have applied for and received some money through the DSA. They like having their own equipment or money to employ readers or helpers and have found the provision they have received helpful.

Information about the DSA was given to students by disability co-ordinators and other welfare advisers in higher education, staff in schools and further education colleges and through the grant application form. The application process involves undergoing a formal assessment of needs and submitting relevant evidence as required. It can be a complicated process, especially if the application is not correctly put together. However, the students in this project had no problems applying. This was mainly because disability co-ordinators often intervened to ensure that students' applications were correctly put together. In some cases it did take a long time for applications to be processed. Most students were referred to access centres for formal assessments, although some were assessed at their institutions.

The present rules governing student finance disadvantage students who can only study part-time because of disability or illness. The DSA is only available to students studying full-time who are in receipt of a maintenance grant from the SAAS. Initially, because of her ME, the only way in which Katy could enter higher education was to study part-time. This meant she was not entitled to apply for either a grant or the DSA. Because she was not entitled to receive a grant, she stayed in private accommodation at some distance from her university for the first year and a half of her studies, so that she could claim housing benefit. After a year and half she realised that she could not continue with her studies unless she moved into student residences as she was finding travelling to and from university too tiring. The university agreed to register her full-time even though she was still doing a reduced number of courses. This meant that she could apply for a grant and the DSA and move into student accommodation.

Through the DSA, she has claimed for a computer with a voice synthesiser, special dietary requirements and a heater. She says she has found all these things very helpful. The computer, in particular, allows her to reduce the amount of handwriting that she has to do and gives her instant access to a machine. She says she was told about the DSA by the university's specialist IT adviser while she was a part-time student and this had provided another incentive for her to register full-time.

Personal support

Students get support from various different sources including disability co-ordinators, members of academic staff, GPs, counsellors, friends, family, support groups and other students. They may seek support from different sources at different times. Sometimes all a student needs is some encouragement and someone to talk things over with. Most of the students now know where to get support if they need it, even if, in the beginning they were not aware of different sources. Several students mentioned that they had found talking to others in a similar situation to themselves helpful. Also other students often provided a useful source of information about entitlements and provision.

Disability co-ordinators are usually contacted when a specific problem arises, although students do sometimes go to them just to talk something over. The students were very positive about the support they had received from disability co-ordinators.

Andrew says he has found the disability co-ordinator very supportive. They have a close relationship and he feels he can rely on her:

> *Anytime I have phoned her up she has phoned me back at the studio or at home. You know she is always going to be there. I don't know how she manages to do it as it is not just me, there are loads of students who need help in the art school and there are a lot of dyslexic students. So she has a lot of students who have problems who she has to deal with. I am just one of many but she always gets back to everybody.*

Katy has built up a network of people she can call on for different kinds of support. These include her GP, the careers adviser, the disability co-ordinator and the specialist IT adviser. In the first year, her GP was very supportive. Her confidence was low and he kept her going simply by telling her she could do it, when she thought she could not manage her studies. She says that, on the whole, the university have been supportive towards her in the degree of flexibility that they have been willing to adopt in her case. She lives on a floor with other students with additional needs and has found them a useful source of information about what she is entitled to. She says she missed out on that kind of information in the first year because she lived in private accommodation.

Sandra mainly relies on her husband for support but has also found the disability co-ordinator helpful:

> *I have found her very helpful. They're there to carry the banner should you require it which is pretty useful to know, that there's someone there that will take up your case and ... you won't necessarily have your name emblazoned on the banner, but she will fight for you. I mean it is a good feeling.*

When Zoë finally made contact with the disability co-ordinator, he suggested that she go along to the dyslexia support group. She has found it useful to talk to other students:

> *We have talk sessions for people with learning difficulties ... you just sit there for an hour and a half and battle things out. And it was quite good to hear people with the same problems or to suggest things to people that they could speak to the lecturers about. Or something they could ask the lecturers to do to make life easier so in that respect it was quite good. You got lots of ideas from other people but no direct help with work or anything.*

Richard is on the committee of the dyslexia support group at his institution. The group provides a useful source of support and information for its members and has now evolved into an advisory group for the university on dyslexia issues.

Jim has found working in the unit for visually impaired students useful because he has made contact with other students and got useful information from them about what is available.

Catherine mainly gets support from her friends and from the course leader. She has, however, also been to a university group for students with disabilities that started in her second year. This was her first contact with the disability co-ordinator. He had sent her information about the group, and he attended the meeting. She found the meeting informative because she heard about other allowances that she may be entitled to. Also it was interesting to hear the experiences of other students:

> *I enjoyed the meeting, it was quite good and it made me think a lot more about what was going on and about things. And access, I'm okay with access but ... (one of the sites) would be a nightmare to get round in a wheelchair I think ... all the special needs students are spread in the different ... (sites) and I think it helps to discuss things that are coming up, and also it's quite good from the point of view of finding out about more things that I might not know about.*

Lillian has built up a network of contacts, who she calls on if she needs support. She also tends to offer other students support. In her role as equal opportunities and disabilities officer, she is prepared to act as an advocate for other students, but where possible she encourages students to become active themselves in tackling discrimination. She is also particularly supportive of new students, because, she says, she found her first few weeks at university very difficult:

> *They stop me in the corridor and they say 'this is great, I've got my computer, I'm really sticking in, I'm coping'. The links are there. And I feel it's helping them settle in.*

Support for students with depression

Gary is the only one of the 12 students who identified himself as having clinical depression. However, several of the other students also described experiencing bouts of depression throughout their time in higher education. This section describes their experiences and the types of support they received. It then goes on to discuss the needs of students with depression and the types of support available to them.

Gary says he feels like he is 'swimming through a void' at the moment:

> *I suppose in a way there is a fine line between sanity and insanity and I suppose it's the same thing as a fine line between having a purpose in life, not having a purpose in life. And when you are on the side where you've got a purpose for life you can see things very clearly. When you are on the other side everything is a fog like I said, you're in this huge white void, ... concentration is difficult, purpose, reason, trying to express or explain this void to people, I mean I'm using the word void because it's the only word I can use to describe it, it's a huge emptiness.*

He says he feels his life has been turned around 180 degrees. He is doing the course because it seems the right thing to do, but he no longer has the same clear sense of purpose that he did when his wife was alive:

> *I mean, deep down, I know it's the right thing to do. But that's as far as my brain lets me go ... doing it is something totally different because, how can you describe it? When you have got a purpose, when you are sharing your life with somebody and they are backing you, the purpose is necessary for both of you, you are focused on achieving something because it is going to benefit the two of you. You are the brighter one, you know you have to do it, there is a lot of reasons for driving. When your partner is gone there is nobody to replace the partner and you're by yourself and you really can't see a reason for doing things.*

Gary is coping with the loss of his wife, but he is also trying to deal with several other personal problems outside of university. All these things are pre-occupying him and making it difficult for him to concentrate. He says, because there is so much going on for him at the moment, he sometimes feels saturated and completely unable to study:

> *I mean if I had just one thing to focus on it wouldn't be so bad. But I don't have one thing to focus on. It's like I said my whole world has been turned upside down.*

He says that his faith is getting him through. He has learned from each of his experiences in the past no matter how difficult they have been. He believes he will also learn from this one at some point. He is taking anti-depressants which seem to help to some extent. They have made him less self-absorbed, he says, and help him to sleep a few hours each night.

Gary has found the staff in his department very helpful. When he was diagnosed as having clinical depression, he asked his GP to write a letter explaining this to his lecturers. Because he finds it difficult to concentrate sometimes, he often needs extensions on his assignments. The staff have been supportive with this and also helped him by identifying specific topics for him to study for the exams.

Gary has found the student support service very helpful. He has had counselling from them as well as receiving help with applying for financial assistance:

> *Go direct to the student advisory office, you've got a problem, you go in you can get counselling, you can get an appointment to talk to somebody, you can go talk to somebody about your career if you want to. If somebody is off and you need to talk to somebody desperately they will assist you. They've got this office for helping you get through the paperwork for special needs, they've got a member there to help you through financially even if you don't have special needs. All the personnel are pleasant to speak to and helpful.*

He has recently made contact with someone who has formed a support group for widows and widowers. He says talking to this woman has been very helpful:

> *I think talking to people with the same experience has helped as well. At least it makes you realise that though you knew other people had the same experience you didn't know how they felt. By listening to how they felt, knowing that other people need anti-depressants, ... knowing what they're going through, what their children go through ... it's a different aspect of your problem and it helps you.*

Andrew has experienced periods of depression throughout his course. Each time he is absent from college for a few weeks. He says the bouts have become less frequent and that each time he comes up feeling a bit stronger:

> *I've been depressed on and off for a few years now and it just sort of comes and goes every now and again. I've just got to accept that that's what's going to happen for a while.*

He says he used to think he could identify specific incidents that caused the depression, but recently it just seems to come on for no particular reason:

> *The last time it happened everything was going really well, I was doing well in the studio and I'd just been given the first part of my dissertation back ... and I'd been given a really good report on it. There was nothing I could identify and then just over a period of a fortnight my mood just sort of dropped really dramatically and I'd to go back to the doctor and I've been put back on anti-depressants again, for about the fourth time.*

When he does get down, he finds it very difficult to seek help:

> *And that's the time, like I know when it gets to that stage that's when I really should be talking to people, initially when my mood starts to drop I should be telling people look I'm starting to feel down again. But it's just really hard to do that, to admit again that you're feeling unwell ... And you feel you're going to have to take time off again.*

His department have been very understanding. They know he works hard and is committed and that when he is absent it is because he is ill. The disability co-ordinator at his institution is also the student counsellor. Andrew has found her very supportive.

In spite of his periods of depression, he has never considered giving up the course and in fact is determined to finish it:

> *Even now the thing that upsets me most when I do get unwell is the fact that I know that I'm on this course and that it's the most important thing in my life at the moment that I finish this course and finish it as well as I possibly can. I mean at the end I don't care whether I get a first or a 2.1 or a 2.2 or a third class Degree. As long as I do as well as I can and try as hard as I can and pass my Degree at the end of the day, I'll be really, really happy ... At the times when I do get down that's the thing that I keep sort of repeating, I've got to get back to art school. I keep saying that to the doctor, can you do something to get me better again because I've got to get back up there.*

Mark had a serious bout of depression in his first year. He describes how, all his life, he had had some hope that his legs would improve, but he knew that, when he got to 18 it was very unlikely that they would improve any more. He was finding it very tiring and frustrating getting around university and when he had his 18th birthday in February of his first year, things seemed to come to a head:

> *When I woke up in the morning 'til I went to bed at night it was like really just feeling really, really low and not wanting to do anything. Really just wanting to kill myself, that's how it was. But after about a month of that, like every single*

> *day it got a bit much and I was beginning to wonder, even if I got over it, would it come back later on, which it did because I had about a week's, well it wasn't even a week, it was a few days I was feeling a bit better. Even though nothing had changed, my walking wasn't any better, but for some reason I was just feeling a bit better and then I started to go back to university, but then it came back again. So I'd convinced myself this was it, I am going to commit suicide really. It's strange to talk about it now, but at the time I was really convinced and I would have, I knew I would have done it ... it was just a matter of time ... I was going through that depression for those weeks and it was like I was just waiting for something small just to happen, like something ordinary, like the straw that broke the camel's back really.*

Initially he did not want to tell anybody about it:

> *I was frightened to go and speak to anybody about it because I was frightened that they would think that I was just feeling sorry for myself and really I wasn't.*

Eventually he decided to speak to his personal tutor about it. His tutor advised him to speak to the student counsellor, who suggested that he go home for a week. He did this but still felt the same when he came back. He went to tell his course leader that he was thinking about leaving the course. His course leader suggested that he take another week off to decide what he was going to do.

He went home, convinced that he was going to kill himself. He just wanted to explain to his mother how he was feeling, so that she would understand. He says he cannot explain what happened, but this was the turning point. From this point on he started to feel better. He realised that, even with all his difficulties getting around, he wanted to be at university, getting his degree:

> *I don't know. It's maybe just going through that every single day, I maybe just got myself together. You can't think like this every day for the rest of your life, so ... either kill yourself or get on with it. It was really strange.*

Looking back, Mark is glad that he had this experience. He says he realised a few months after the depression that he had actually been low before it without realising:

> *But even before then, like throughout my life, my attitude was, it was a bit strange really. It was like well I'm going to carry on and I'm going to go to university and I'm going to get a good job, which is great, but really if I had the choice I'd rather just not be here. As long as it didn't affect other people, as long as my Mum didn't miss me or whatever, which obviously she would, but ... But then now it's ... it's as if it was ... I thought up until then that I had maybe accepted the way I am, but really I hadn't and then this had happened because I'd realised that this is it, this is as good as you're going to get really.*

Since the depression, he has felt differently. He has accepted his disability more and has decided to get on with his life. The depression has not come back again. He sometimes feels fed up with different things, like anyone else, but not really depressed. He also feels closer to God. Surviving the depression has proved to him that God exists.

Looking back, he says that the counsellor and his course leader were both very supportive. He was unhappy, however, with the way in which his personal tutor handled the situation. At the beginning of first year, the students had been told to talk to their personal tutors if they had any problems with work or personal problems. Mark says it was difficult for him to admit to anyone how he was feeling, but he finally managed to tell his personal tutor. His tutor told him to go and see a counsellor. Mark was quite angry about this. He says he felt misled,

because he had been told to talk to his personal tutor and then his tutor told him he was not really qualified, so he should talk to someone else. Afterwards, Mark felt awkward around his tutor, because he felt he had really exposed himself and they were to continue having a lecturer/student relationship. Mark says, he would have preferred to have been told to speak to a counsellor at the outset.

Mike says he feels depressed and worried about many things at the moment. His financial situation is a great concern, the workload is high, his mother has been ill and his grandmother died recently. He says because he has been so worried about surviving financially, getting a placement and meeting the requirements of the course, he has hardly had time to process all these events. He is having trouble sleeping at night, and is falling asleep in the mornings and missing classes. He also finds it hard to motivate himself and to concentrate on the course.

Mike has been seeing the student counsellor once a week and has found this useful up to a point. The academic staff are willing to help but are most helpful when he can tell them exactly what he needs. He says he feels it is mainly his friends that keep him going, when he thinks about giving up:

> *I have been seeing the student counsellor from the university ... about once every week or so, but ... He's managed to help me with a few things, but mostly seeing the student counsellor is just a way for me to sit down and off-load everything ... But as far as the ... staff don't really ... well they do have quite a bit of student contact, and they are willing to help if they can, but it's 'we'll help but only if you tell us how to help', sort of thing. They're not so good at coming up with solutions. To take decision-making off my stressed student's shoulders as it were.*

The experiences of these four students are all very different, but there are some common elements. The students describe feeling very low, and sometimes suicidal during bouts of depression. Depression affects their concentration and motivation and they may have difficulty sleeping. All of these things affect their ability to study.

There can be no prescribed formula for supporting students with depression, as their needs are so variable, both individually and at different times for the same student. Academically, the students mainly need flexibility from their departments. They sometimes need extensions on assignments or periods of absence. In some cases, students may need to negotiate to retake parts of the course. Students may consider giving up and they need support and advice to help them at these times.

It can be difficult for students who are depressed to tell anyone how they are feeling and to seek support at times when they most need it. This presents a difficulty for welfare staff, as they usually rely on students coming to them when they need help. In a number of cases, staff reported adopting a different approach, whereby they would make contact with students who appeared to be exhibiting signs of depression, such as non-attendance or lack of concentration. The issue for institutions and staff is to decide to what extent students should be relied on to seek help and to what extent a more proactive approach is appropriate.

Students who are depressed usually need the support of a counsellor, although medical or psychiatric help may also be appropriate. Academic staff and welfare staff need to know when it is appropriate to refer a student elsewhere. In Mark's

case, he did the right thing by talking to his personal tutor and his tutor did the right thing by referring him on to counselling. Unfortunately, this left Mark feeling uncomfortable and exposed. Institutions need to provide clear information about what sources of support are available and what students can expect from them.

Students who are depressed will not necessarily identify themselves to the disability co-ordinator or disclose their depression to the institution. While they may receive support from counselling and welfare services, they will not necessarily categorise themselves as having 'special needs' or even label their difficulties as 'depression'. Also students using counselling services will be assured of the confidentiality of any disclosures, although counsellors may encourage a student to talk to their lecturers where appropriate. This makes it difficult for institutions to identify students with depression or to make any kind of formal or standardised response to supporting them. This also raises the difficult issue for welfare services and for institutions of what to do when a student seems at risk of suicide or self-harm.

Some students currently in higher education also have other kinds of mental health difficulty. This discussion has focused on depression because some of the students taking part described experiences of it. It is difficult for us to say anything about other kinds of mental health difficulty such as schizophrenia, phobias or anxiety disorders, except that some of the issues, such as non-disclosure and variability of needs will presumably be similar.

Discussion

All institutions provide various types of support to all their students, such as counselling and welfare services. In addition, certain sources of support, such as the DSA and the disability co-ordinator are specifically available to students with disabilities.

Information technology

IT solutions tend to be very helpful, but are expensive and, as such, are usually only accessible to students in receipt of the DSA. Some institutions have a limited amount of equipment available, but the prevalent model at the moment is for students to be provided with their own equipment through the DSA. Students who do have computers also need training and ongoing technical support. It is not always clear who will provide these and attention needs to be paid to these kinds of provision. It is important that institutions do not begin to see IT as a sufficient means of supporting students with disabilities. Students have varying support needs which may or may not include the use of IT.

Finance and the DSA

Financial hardship is a serious problem for some students with disabilities. While financial difficulties are not necessarily related to students' disabilities, they may be compounded by difficulties getting part-time or temporary work. Severe financial hardship may result in students giving up their studies.

The DSA goes some way to helping students with disabilities to participate in higher education. However, it is not available to part-time students or those in receipt of a 'fees only' grant. This seriously disadvantages some students with disabilities or medical conditions for whom full-time study is not an option. Also some students with disabilities have extra expenses because of their disabilities for which no provision is currently made.

Personal support

Personal support, whether from friends or family or from institutional staff, can be crucial in helping students to get through their studies and in preventing them from giving up. The availability of counselling is particularly helpful to students with depression.

Students with mental health difficulties

Students who are depressed do not always seek support when they need it. Institutions need to address the issue of whether it is sufficient to publicise support services available and rely on students to use them when they need to, or whether a more proactive approach is appropriate whereby students who are exhibiting signs of depression are actively supported to seek counselling.

Students with mental health difficulties will not necessarily identify themselves to their institutions, but may be receiving confidential support from counselling or welfare services. For this reason and because individual needs vary so greatly, it is difficult for institutions to work out a standard response to the needs of such students. However, there is no doubt that students with mental health difficulties would benefit from clearer institutional policies and academic staff who were better informed about their needs.

8: Social Life and Accommodation

This chapter concentrates on what the students had to tell us about the non-academic side of their lives at university in particular it looks at aspects of their social lives, their accommodation, and their relationships with other students.

Social life

Some of the students do not have the energy to be very active socially, or they are choosing to concentrate on their studies. Others have active social lives. Like many students, several found it difficult initially to make friends and settle into student life. Jim believes that facilities for disabled students are very good at his institution and the next step is to really try to integrate disabled and non-disabled students and to try actively to dispel any misconceptions that non-disabled students may have.

Mark finds getting around university very tiring and he finds going out is not actually a good way for him to relax:

> *I go to the pub sometimes, a club or that, but nowhere near as much as ... some of the other people in the flat ... it seems like they go and do that to relax, but ... the effort I'm having to put into it ... it's not really a form of relaxation. I'd rather just stay in the house.... Occasionally I'll do that. I usually go home at the weekends anyway, see all my old friends there. Peace and quiet.*

Because of her ME, Katy does not have the energy for a social life:

> *... if you've got ME and you' e going to study, you're going to sacrifice your social life. You don't have much of one is the answer because you have to make the choice. You can't pull all-nighters therefore other people might be out enjoying themselves at the weekend, you're weekend is just part of your time for getting on with things basically. ... You don't have a social life as such because the work's got to be done.*

If her health did improve, this would allow her in theory to do more courses per term, but she says she would rather have a social life:

> *It would be nice to get to the point where I had a social life as well... I think I'd rather have other parts to my life rather than extra study.*

Andrew is concentrating on his course and does not tend to go out as much as he used to when he was in nursing:

> *Because I live out of town and to come into ... [town] for a night out you have to rely on staying in someone's house overnight .. I don't really like doing that, I like to go back to my own bed at night. A lot of my friends are still down in London .. I am not in so much contact with them as I used to be and quite a lot of them I have lost contact with all together. I have just sort of adapted moving back here and the course is so important at the moment so I try to focus on that and on keeping myself well so I can get myself through it properly and do my best at it.*

Lillian has little social life because, she says, her studies are more important. Some days she gets physically very tired and she has to take this into account. She has chosen to live at some distance from the university to be near her family and she does not have a lot of money to spend on socialising. She says she will have all the social life she wants when she graduates.

Gary says he invested his energy into his marriage and feels he has no real friends at the moment. He has found coming to university good, because it provides him with opportunities to meet new people and socialise. He and his

course-mates have started to organise regular get-togethers as they realised they were not often meeting up socially.

Jim has an active social life. He is involved in several student societies, including the debating society, a group on disability and the history society. He also writes regularly for the student newspaper. He admits that, at times, it is difficult to fit in his coursework:

> *At times it can seem like my course is secondary to everything else, but I tend to get through and drop off a lot of the things I'm doing at the odd time.*

Richard has an active social life and is involved in the SRC and several different university societies. He is attending university in his home town, so already knew people there when he started his course.

Mike has settled in now, but was very homesick at the start of his first year. He found it difficult to meet new people because he was still finding his way around. He went home every week because he had little else to do:

> *... most of the first year here I was going home virtually every Saturday up until I put my knee out in January '96. The start of September '95 I was going home every Saturday and through the Christmas holidays I was going home two or three times a week because I didn't really have much to do. Meeting new people is remarkably difficult as well because I can't actually go to places that I don't know without a guide. But when you don't know anybody you've got nobody to guide you, so that was very difficult. I only really knew people on the course or people that I knew beforehand.*

In January of his first year he dislocated his knee and had his leg in plaster for 6 weeks. He could not get home during this time and this provided a turning point for him. He found that students from his course were willing to help him to carry things like shopping and his laptop. He says because of this he got out of the habit of going home and started to integrate more with other students. He has more of a social life now, but his main priority is to get his degree:

> *... some of the students on my course think I'm a bit strange because I'm here to learn. They sort of think, well no, you're a student you should be here to go out clubbing every night.*

Catherine now has many friends and is very happy at university. She says she found it difficult initially, however, because she did not know anyone:

> *Scary, the first day was scary. Because I think ... I moved into a student flat and the way they did students flats was ... there were five of us, but none of us were on the same course. So we all like made friends quite easily in our flat and then on like the Wednesday of our first week we had to split up into courses ... but we made friends quite quickly because ... just like talk to ... a neighbour and ... we sat in a group and talked. And then it got better, yes.*

She says she was a bit nervous about whether she would be accepted:

> *Like I suppose I was quite nervous when I came, would I ... be accepted like anyone else? but no, everybody ... treats me like normal. And I think if anyone turned round and shouted at me I would say it was because of me and not because of any disability.*

Lillian also found her first few weeks difficult:

> *Despite all the positive things, for the first two or three weeks at university, I felt so isolated. I'm told this is not unusual even for the able-bodied students to feel this way. 'Help, you know, I don't know anybody, this is such a big place'.*

Jim is enjoying himself socially, but he realises that some non-disabled students are still wary or uncertain around disabled students. He describes how, because facilities for students with disabilities are very good at his university, the disability group is currently evolving from a pressure group and support group into more of a social group. The members are trying to encourage non-disabled students as well as disabled students to come along:

> *At least for the moment we have a lot of good facilities and we don't need to be constantly raising awareness, although we should, that's part of what we want to do, we want to be more social and make people realise that disabled people ... can enjoy themselves as much as anybody else.*

He believes that the group will provide an opportunity for non-disabled students to come along and ask questions in an informal setting that will dispel any misconceptions they may have of disabled students:

> *Other people have questions that they can ask myself and ... other friends who are disabled, they may just not ask, because they may you know have certain misconceptions that you can ... help to hopefully dispel.*

Because he has been disabled from birth, he says he is very happy to talk to people about his disability:

> *I've been visually impaired since birth, so obviously it's not even a major problem for me to talk about it, so yeah, I'll try and help if I can explain whatever it is they want to ask.*

Mike is also willing to explain his difficulties to other students if they are interested. Some people make inappropriate comments and he tends to tell them so or ignore them:

> *Usually, the ones that are interested. The ones that aren't interested ... if they do make any inadvertently stupid comments or do things that are less than appropriate I tend to either just ignore them or just say to them that's stupid. But the ones that are interested yes, I'm perfectly willing to sit down and explain the problems. For the most part actually I find a lot of the students on the course want to know and a lot of them are willing to help where they can. So I have no problems talking to other people at all.*

Accommodation

Some of the students have accommodation requirements because of their disabilities, others do not. If a student has difficulties associated with their accommodation, this can cause stress, which will ultimately affect their studies.

Lillian lives in a small bungalow, which has a private parking space. When she originally applied for it through the local council, she was offered hostel accommodation. She believed that she was entitled to something better, so got her councillor to check the situation. Apparently, the council had not given her enough points, which had put her too low on the priority list. She got this sorted out, was bumped up the list and got the bungalow.

Mark lives in student accommodation close to the university. He needs to be able to park near to his flat, which sometimes has been problematic (see section on Access, mobility and transport). There is a lift in the building but he tends to use the stairs as it is quite slow.

Lisa had a problem with the lease on her present flat. When she came to sign it, she asked for a copy that she could take away and read. The landlord refused, so she signed it without reading it. This has led to some difficulties now that she wants to move out.

Mike was in student halls in the first year. He enjoyed being around so many other students, but found that, with eight people sharing a flat, tensions mounted throughout the year. As a disabled student, he is entitled to a place in university accommodation but he prefers not to take it. This year he is staying by himself in private lodgings and he hopes to share with one or two others next year. The welfare adviser (before the disability co-ordinator took up post) asked him if anything in his first year accommodation could be changed. This led to a few small changes, such as an extra light switch and a digital read-out on the microwave.

Katy has had on-going difficulties with the accommodation office at her university. She needs ground floor accommodation and access to a shower rather than a bath. She has bought herself a heater using DSA money, so that she can control the temperature in her room. Over Christmas, some students in halls are required to move so that the university can let out their rooms. This year, Katy was clear about her needs over Christmas, but was still put into a first floor room with access to a bath only. This meant that she had to go back and explain her situation to the accommodation office again. This all costs her energy. She believes that because she has no outer sign of ME, the accommodation office do not always take the illness seriously:

> *... you're not particularly taken seriously because they look at you, they see someone with no visible problem, so what's the big deal. If you've come to see me you must have climbed three flights of stairs, so you can't be that ill. There's a lot of that and, you know, academically I think the university are very aware, it's in these areas that they fall down very badly at times. ... areas which are very important, where you stay is very important. You can get as much support as you like academically, but if where you stay is not suitable, your studies are affected.*

She found moving at Christmas very strenuous and would like to avoid this next year if possible. For this reason, she has applied to stay in an adapted student flat next year. However, in order to get a place in the flat she has to convince the university's medical adviser of her needs. Again, this has caused her stress and cost her energy. She cannot be assured that even a member of the medical profession will accept her illness, because ME is still controversial:

> *I made an appointment before the start of the term to go and see him about this accommodation thing. The first appointment they could give me was about three weeks away, that was fine, made the appointment, then just a couple of days before, it was cancelled. And fair enough, they cancelled it and re-arranged it and let me know beforehand and everything ... but this was about another three weeks away. So eventually ... I get quite nervous about going to see doctors ... doctors that I'm not sure where I stand with I can be quite nervous, so for me this was actually, you know, I'm going to have to go and see him about this thing and that was quite a stressful thing for me.*

She did not like his manner toward her and feels the meeting went badly. She believes he will probably not do anything on her behalf:

> *... he couldn't see why I needed to move. ... He knew nothing about university accommodation at all and ... well he didn't see what the problem was with*

> *moving out for Christmas and can you not get someone to help you move your stuff and I just looked at him and said I have to get someone to move my stuff, I can't do it on my own.*

If the university had accepted the evidence of her own GP, it would have saved her a lot of stress and effort. She went to explain this to the university secretary and he told her to write to the general medical council if she had a complaint:

> *Like I'm going to go to the general medical council, you know. If I had a complaint about how things were going, if it was something that affected the university ... I said well I think this matter is something that affects the university ... oh he'd look into that. And I actually phoned today because I never heard, he said he'd get back to me, and I just got from the secretary oh well I'll speak to him, he's not in just now, I'll speak to him this afternoon, but I think he's done everything he can. And I said well I thought he said he'd get back to me. But I'm not letting the matter go.*

The matter is still unresolved and no doubt will continue to cause her stress. She says she is getting fed up with it and running out of energy to keep fighting:

> *I think I'm beginning to get to the point of knowing what I need, but then you've also got to be able to put it across to them and if you're particularly, with any illness or disability, you must reach a point where, if you're tired and you're stressed and you've just had enough, you can't be bothered with it, you really can't be bothered with it.*

Jim has had difficulties with one of his flat-mates. He shares a flat with three others and currently does not speak to one of them because of a catalogue of abusive behaviour:

> *He just basically made a lot of, you know, what I would regard as untrue allegations against me ... in front of my other flat-mates about how ... helpless I was compared to ... like other blind people he had seen. ... The visual impairment thing did come into it quite a lot ... according to my other flat-mates, he would kind of be like laughing at me, or making it very obvious he was laughing at me so that I wouldn't ask him anything ... At times, you know, he ... implied that I wouldn't get a job and things like that, so that was quite a big part of what he used, but, it was just a whole load of things he tried to use.*

Jim tackled the person on his behaviour. He was prepared to try to discuss it with him, but the person was unresponsive:

> *When I finally, you know had a massive argument with him ... he didn't see why he should change his attitude towards me or anything.*

Jim clearly does not let this get to him. He knows that the person's behaviour was completely unacceptable, but was still prepared to discuss it with him. Since the person has made it clear that he is not open to discussion, Jim is ignoring him. The flat-mate will shortly be evicted from the flat and the problem will be solved.

Discussion

Social life and accommodation are important aspects of a student's experience of higher education. If either is a source of stress this impacts on a student's studies.

Social life

While some of the students have very active social lives, others simply do not have the energy or prefer to concentrate on their studies. Difficult first experiences are not uncommon for many students, but for students with disabilities this may be compounded by physical restrictions due to their disabilities. While many non-

disabled students have a positive attitude towards students with disabilities, there was some indication that some non-disabled students do act inappropriately, ignorantly or even abusively around disabled students. Institutions currently do little to combat lack of awareness or negative attitudes amongst non-disabled students and consideration needs to be given to the extent of institutions' responsibility in this area.

Accommodation

While many of the students had only minor problems with their accommodation, Katy's problems highlight the need for clear policies on provision for students with disabilities and greater awareness amongst staff throughout the institution, including accommodation staff and senior management.

9: Thoughts on Employment

This chapter looks beyond the students' current experience of higher education and towards their futures. They reflect on their plans and hopes for future employment and talk about some of the steps they have already taken towards gaining that employment.

Several of the students have started to think about what they will do when they graduate. Some are already taking steps towards this by making contacts or getting relevant experience. All of them are taking their disabilities or particular needs into account when thinking about jobs. Some believe their disabilities will provide them with an advantage in the kind of work they want to do. Others have made informal general enquiries to determine how potential employers view their particular disability. Some will confront the issue of disclosure when they come to apply for jobs. Others have already had varied experiences of the job market.

Lillian was told at school that having a disability would limit her employment options:

> *... looking back on it I remember being told by the careers officer at the time 'because of your disability you'll go into something like a library, or the civil service', something like that.*

During her 17 years employment, she was active in the union on disability and equal opportunities issues and, she says, she became well aware that discrimination went on within the organisation and in industry more generally. She stuck with the job, even though it was not a chosen career path, because she felt the likely alternative was unemployment. Losing her job and being unemployed were demoralising experiences for her:

> *I know that when I graduate, one of the things I've got to keep telling myself. Hopefully it won't happen, but I've got to keep it in the back of my mind that it could, is that I won't have a job. And I'll be applying for jobs and I'll be knocked back. But I've got to keep fighting. I keep telling myself, it won't be me, it won't be my disability. It'll be just the current situation in the job market. If I think I go down the road of thinking it's my disability, it's going to get negative and it's going to have a negative effect so I mustn't think that way.*

Because of her experiences of employment and unemployment, she is already pro-active about getting a job when she graduates, even though she is only in her second year:

> *I said I would never do it but I've actually started to do it. Making contacts in various academic and disability circles and it's not what you know, it's who you know. I said on principle I'd never do that but I've changed my mind.*

She is clear about what kind of work she would like to do after she graduates:

> *I'd like to go freelance as a disability advisory consultant. ... I'd quite happily travel the country to advise people, employers and organisations on disability issues and disability rights.*

Her work with the students' association and different disability charities is providing her with useful experience, although she did not take them on for this reason, but does them because she enjoys the work.

Andrew opted to do a placement in his second year because he thought it would mean he would not have to write an essay. In the event, it proved to be a positive

experience and will provide useful work experience. The placement involved working with visually impaired students in a mainstream school. His tutor describes how valuable the school pupils found working with Andrew:

> *...they'd all just felt really stupid sitting in the mainstream art classes and didn't like art and felt that that was their least favourite subject and a lot of them turned around a great deal because here was Andrew who was at art school. He talked much more in terms of touch and what things felt like and, you know, used a variety of different ways of getting interesting marks on materials and fabrics. So he brought a whole new way, that he's had to learn, to them. It was very interesting, they've got a diary of it. Some of them just said I used to hate art but now it's my favourite subject.*

Because he is interested in working with people with disabilities after he graduates, he opted to do a second placement in his third year. This time he worked with deaf and blind young people at a day centre. When he graduates, he sees himself doing a series of residences working with different groups, helping them to express themselves through art. He believes his disability will be an advantage in this kind of work:

> *I think what stands in my favour is the fact that I've got a disability myself and I've got more empathy for that group of people and I know in the past ... I did art and the art was seen as more therapy and like a means towards self expression. That sort of thing is really important I think, it's really important that people are allowed to express themselves and not just given a piece of clay so they can become more dextrous and get more tactile. I think really it should be to do with expressing how they're feeling as well.*

He has already been offered voluntary work with people with learning disabilities and the organisation where he did his second placement have asked him to go back any time.

Jim wants to be a journalist. He will need practical experience in order to get into a post-graduate course. He has already approached two newspapers and set up week-long voluntary placements with them during the Summer. He will shadow journalists and hopes to write small articles for publication. The editors at both newspapers wanted to discuss the practicalities of how he would write for them. He was happy to discuss this with them because he realised that they did not have experience of working with a visually impaired person before:

> *A lot of my interview ... was based on this particular problem ... how you take notes, how you write articles and things. ... and they said that doesn't really matter you can just kind of come along and just provide your own equipment ... So in both cases they have been very, very positive and helpful and encouraging. ... [And they said] we'll see if there are any problems that come up, we'll just try and iron them out with negotiation with yourself.*

Katy asked the careers liaison officer in her department to make enquiries on her behalf to several accountancy firms to find out their views on employing someone with ME. In order to qualify as a chartered accountant, an employee would have to commit to working full-time and studying for exams at the same time for at least three years. Part-time work did not seem to be an option. There is much more flexibility in the training to become a certified accountant, however. Katy cannot predict how her health will be in two years when she graduates and therefore cannot say what she will go for yet.

Her careers adviser says that they have not yet confronted the issue of whether she should disclose her illness to future employers. The careers adviser said:

> *Disclosure to potential future employers about the extent or the nature of her condition ... has to be a balance between ... employers need to know, right to know and ... what is appropriate and comfortable for her to disclose really.*

Gary is considering doing another post-graduate course in software design after the one he is doing now. This would give him more qualifications and allow him to become a technical adviser. His main reason, however, is that it would give him more breathing space before he starts work again. He says he does not feel ready yet to start full-time work, as he has seen how he has struggled with studying:

> *I don't know if I could mentally do that job right now, you know, because I see how I am as a student, because right now I don't even know what kind of job I want to do when it's finished. I know what I'm capable of doing, I know what kind of work I've done. I know I'm not capable of doing that ... level of concentration of work now, I know that I can't. And I know why, besides my back and my knees the depression has got more over-shadowing, making it difficult to concentrate, making it difficult to focus on things, I suppose making it difficult to see a reason for doing it.*

Zoë is planning to go into the RAF when she graduates. She asked the disability co-ordinator to make an informal enquiry before she applied, about the RAF's attitude towards dyslexia. He did this without mentioning her name. The answer was that severe dyslexia may cause a problem. Zoë's is relatively mild. She mentioned it at interview when she was talking about school experiences and it was not followed up. She is also interested in studying medicine and may pursue this in the future.

Lisa believes that her dyslexia will provide her with an advantage when she becomes a teacher because she will understand how children feel when they have difficulties with their work. She has been getting excellent grades on her placements and is clearly potentially a very good teacher. The disability co-ordinator believes that her main difficulty in becoming a teacher may be overcoming people's negative attitudes and ignorance about dyslexia. One of her placement teachers was initially wary about how good a teacher she would be, but was gradually convinced of Lisa's abilities. She believes that if she is given the chance she will become a very good teacher. This placement teacher told us:

> *I was a bit wary, but I thought how on earth could she be a teacher if she's dyslexic, but she had lots of strategies and my thinking began to change ... through it ... I didn't in anyway hold it against her, I tried to keep an open mind but at the back of my mind the whole time I monitored her, I was thinking but how can she do it, you know, she can't be a teacher but she had lots of strategies.*

Mike's course involves a one year work placement. Placements are advertised and students have to apply for them. He has mentioned his visual impairment on his CV, and will try and present it positively:

> *In fact, the lecturer in charge of sorting out the placements, when I told him, when I said what's the chances of there being a problem with me getting a placement with my eye problem he said well I don't know basically, that was his response. So it's just a case of I've got to present myself as well as I can and try and make something positive of the visual impairment, which actually I think I can do to be honest.*

Discussion

Most of the students had ideas about what they would like to do after their courses. Some were taking active steps towards gaining relevant experience and making contacts that might help them when they come to seek employment in the future.

HE and employment

There are three main areas to do with employment in which institutions need to take the needs of students with disabilities into account.

- The provision of references.
- Requirements on students to undertake placements as part of their courses.
- The provision of careers advice and support.

Thought needs to be given to the issue of whether referees should refer to students' disabilities when providing references. Some staff were clear that this information should be treated as confidential, others were not. Also some students are not disclosing disabilities to their institutions because they believe that this will be disclosed to future employers. Institutions need to be clearer about their position on this.

Setting up placements is another area in which institutions need to give consideration to the needs of students with disabilities. Staff in charge of course placements will not necessarily be aware of disability issues when co-ordinating placements. They may need support and training to help them with this. Where institutions agree to provide placements, they need to ensure that accessible placements are available to students with disabilities. Where institutions support students in finding their own placements, again, thought needs to be given to providing appropriate advice and support to students with disabilities.

Careers advice is another area in which institutions need to take into account the needs of disabled students. The careers advisor that we spoke to had a good awareness of disability issues and employment. However, institutions need to make sure that appropriate advice and support is available to students with disabilities.

10: Institutional Perspective

This chapter looks at things from the perspective of the higher education institutions. It is based on responses given by the 19 disability co-ordinators who completed questionnaires and on the views expressed in interviews by 27 members of higher education staff in nine institutions, including the disability co-ordinator in each institution. The students taking part were asked to nominate individuals whom they felt had played a significant role in their experiences of higher education so far. They nominated staff in various different roles, including heads of department, members of academic staff, and members of support staff, (including careers advisers and counsellors, and IT specialists). In some cases, students nominated individuals whom they had found personally supportive. In others, they suggested staff who had a high profile in the institution on disability issues generally. In one case an individual was nominated because the student had had a difficult experience with that person.

A time of change

All SHEFC-funded institutions now have a person employed in the role of disability co-ordinator, although in some cases this job title is not being used. All institutions have reviewed their provision for students with disabilities. They have also published Disability Statements, as required of them by SHEFC.

Up until a few years ago, institutions tended to respond on an individual basis to the needs of disabled students. Provision was fairly ad hoc and reactive. Institutions are still responding to individual needs, since every student's needs are unique, but they are also beginning to look at moving towards a more proactive approach. Several respondents said that they were hoping eventually to get to the point where provision for students with disabilities had become a routine part of standard practice, rather than an add-on. Institutions are at different stages with this, but all have at least reviewed their provision and are aware of the gaps. Most have developed pre-entry procedures for students with disabilities and have made alternative exam arrangements available.

Many institutions have taken steps towards making their buildings physically more accessible to people with mobility difficulties, but adapting the physical environment is often expensive and many institutions still have a long way to go before they can offer completely accessible environments.

Provision still tends to vary within an institution and depends greatly on the experience, knowledge and attitudes of the members of staff that it falls to. In many cases, students might actually receive a very high level of support from their departments; however disability co-ordinators usually cannot guarantee that this will happen. There is still a need for staff education and policy development to ensure that students at least receive a minimum level of support throughout their institutions.

Increasing numbers of students are now declaring disabilities, especially students with dyslexia. This suggests that the message is filtering through that disclosure will not necessarily lead to disadvantage and that support is available.

Some students still choose not to tell their institutions, however, and there is still a way to go before all students see disclosure as a positive option.

Reassessment of provision for students with disabilities has come at a time of increasing student numbers and tighter budgets in higher education more generally. Academic staff said they would often like to be able to spend more time supporting students with disabilities but found it impossible given the increasing pressures on their time. The following quotations are from a head of department and a lecturer:

> *... now things are very, very bad, you know, the staff-student ratio is very high and you're working all the time. And into all of that comes a very important thing which is the integration of people with disabilities into higher education. You can't reject it, but at the same time it squeezes you incredibly.*

> *As student numbers grow it becomes more and more difficult for hard-pressed members of staff to deal with it as they would like to. One might like to spend a lot of time with a particular student and feel that they deserve it by the effort they are putting in but it is just simply totally impossible.*

Tighter budgets and greater student numbers also put pressure on resources available. This affects the degree of flexibility that staff have in using resources, which in turn affects their ability to respond to the needs of individual students. For example, one course leader described how, increasingly, he is less able to juggle the timetable to ensure that students with mobility difficulties are in accessible classrooms. A course leader told us that:

> *... our ability to have that control over the timetable has been reduced as the SED have imposed higher and higher room utilisation and factors on us ... Where before only say 50% of the rooms were being used, but as the management have forced up the utilisation factor, the ability to actually move classes around to suit students with disabilities becomes much more constrained.*

While institutions are taking a positive stance on disability issues generally, what they can actually achieve is severely constrained by financial limitations. Every change has to be weighed up against competing priorities. This means that costly changes such as physical adaptations may take years to achieve. In a climate where institutions are having to cut budgets affecting large numbers of students, provision for students with disabilities is only one thing competing with many for funds. A disability co-ordinator said:

> *I suppose everybody's faced with the same problems in that the university is so strapped for cash and everywhere is the same now ... That is the point I think with the disability issue: because the sorts of things you're arguing for are often for very small numbers of people and when the university itself is having to cut other budgets which are affecting large numbers of students then it's quite hard to argue the case for certain ... a share of the pot if you like, for a very small number of students.*

Influential members of staff

Disability Co-ordinators

Each SHEFC-funded institution now has a disability co-ordinator. Many of these posts were supported by funding under the SHEFC Support for Students with Disabilities Staff Initiative. The person in this role provides a point of contact for students with disabilities, offering information, advice, support and advocacy

where necessary, working with students pre-entry and throughout their courses. The co-ordinators liaise with academic departments to negotiate support for students and to support staff, either through staff development events or by responding to individual requests for information or advice. They are also engaged in raising awareness of disability issues within institutions, contributing to the development of policy and procedures and reviewing and monitoring provision.

Some institutions previously had members of staff designated to co-ordinate provision for students with disabilities, but the supported appointment of co-ordinators in every funded institution was generally regarded as having had a positive influence on institutions' provision for students with disabilities.

Few of the co-ordinators have full-time posts, and where they do, they are often employed only part-time as disability co-ordinators. The job remit is broad for a part-time post and most co-ordinators described increasing pressure on their time. Work with students was seen as a rewarding part of the job, but several co-ordinators said it could easily fill a full-time post by itself. Pre-entry visits, needs assessments, supporting students with DSA applications, on-going support and liaison with academic staff were all time-consuming, especially with increasing numbers of students declaring disabilities. This left little time for the other aspects of the job. Some expressed frustration because they felt what they could achieve in the post was severely constrained by the lack of time available. One noted that:

I can only chip away at the mountain at the moment.

Most co-ordinators made contact with students when they first declared a disability, whether pre-entry or during their studies, inviting students to meet with them. At this point, students would be supported as appropriate and given information about any entitlements. After the initial contact co-ordinators tended to rely on students coming to them when they needed support, although some did invite students to follow-up meetings at the start of each year. The co-ordinators offered students support, information and advice but encouraged students, as far as possible, to take responsibility for seeking support when they needed it. In some cases, where it seemed appropriate, co-ordinators or other members of staff might unobtrusively 'keep an eye' on a student, whom they felt would be unlikely to seek support.

Disability co-ordinators received support from the national co-ordinator, from line managers and through the co-ordinators' network. The network was reported to be a useful place for sharing ideas, discussing issues and getting support and encouragement. Some co-ordinators expressed the need for administrative and/or technical back-up, which they felt would alleviate some of the pressure on their time.

Most co-ordinators were employed initially on a fixed term contract. Some institutions have now made the post permanent which seems to indicate an on-going commitment to the support of students with disabilities. In other institutions, co-ordinators felt an on-going commitment to their posts had been implied in Disability Statements.

In each institution, the disability co-ordinator provided a focal point for disability issues. It was also seen as a positive aim to spread knowledge, expertise and commitment to disability issues more widely throughout institutions. This was happening in two main ways: through influential key figures and through networks.

Influential key figures

In several institutions there were key members of staff, other than the disability co-ordinators, who were influencing provision for students with disabilities in a positive way. For some this was part of their role. They may, for example, have a particular remit to look at standardising alternative exam arrangements, or specifically be employed to expand technological provision for students with disabilities. Some, however, had in-depth knowledge of a particular disability or a commitment to disability issues because of their own personal interest or circumstances. They mainly tended to influence provision in their own departments, but might also have a wider influence depending on their level of seniority.

The risk when one member of staff is seen as an expert, is that others tend to off-load disability issues onto them rather than finding out about the issues themselves. Two of these 'experts' said they would prefer it if all staff became familiar with disability issues and that this would actually improve provision. One head of department was aware that staff only tend to seek information about supporting students with disabilities when they have students on their case-load. For this reason, he was actively assigning students with disabilities to as many different staff as possible in his department, in order that they would have to confront the issues themselves. This he believed was the way to increase awareness and spread knowledge and experience more widely.

Networks

In several institutions, a member of staff in each department had been designated as the departmental disability contact. This person provided support and advice for students and staff in the department and as such, usually took some of the load off the disability co-ordinator. This also had the effect of getting more staff throughout the institution committed to improving provision for students with disabilities. In some cases the disability contacts were also invited to sit on committees or advisory groups looking at disability issues.

Disability Statements

The Disability Discrimination Act of 1995 (Part 4) imposed on SHEFC a duty to require higher education institutions to publish Disability Statements. The statements were to include information on existing policy, existing provision, future activity and future policy development. The first Statements were to be produced early in 1997. Because of the timing of our questionnaire, disability co-ordinators were only able to send drafts of Disability Statements or other related policy documents to us with their questionnaires.

The drafts that we saw tended to state institutions' commitment to equality of opportunity for students (and staff) with disabilities. All stated clearly that applications from prospective students with disabilities would be considered by the same academic criteria as those from non-disabled students. Several stated a commitment to continuing improvements to the physical environment. All acknowledged that further progress would need to be made towards comprehensive equality of opportunity and that future development would be constrained by available resources.

Producing the Disability Statements was seen as a positive exercise by most of the disability co-ordinators. They said they felt that the statements had helped to raise the profile of disability issues in institutions, because they made a clear statement of current provision including gaps and had usually been approved by senior management before publication.

Some disability co-ordinators felt that, because the statements are public documents, statements of future plans could be viewed as a commitment by institutions to future development of disability provision.

At least one disability co-ordinator is using the Disability Statement to raise awareness amongst institutional staff of the institution's position on disability. He said the status of the document is ambiguous at the moment as it is unclear whether it could be seen as a legally binding contract between the institution and its students. He believed that until this is clarified, problems could arise.

Committees, monitoring and feedback

Some institutions have set up committees with representatives from different sectors of the institution to look at disability issues. These may include representatives of senior management, academic departments, estates and buildings, accommodation, welfare, and other services such as the library or computing facilities. In some cases disability issues are discussed by sub-groups of welfare or equal opportunities committees. Such groups may be advisory groups or be developing policy themselves. All, however, feed into decision-making forums in some way, either directly or through people in the groups raising disability issues in their own departments.

Sometimes students are asked to sit on committees or student input is sought by asking student groups for reactions to proposals. One disability co-ordinator said she felt it added more weight to a request if it came from a student group or from the students' association. It was also easier and safer for students themselves to use the group to voice their views to the institution because it did not single out any one student. Some disability co-ordinators had helped or encouraged student groups to start up. In some cases, these were mainly support groups, in others they were pressure groups or had evolved into advisory groups to the institution.

Disability issues were also being raised through reports being produced by disability co-ordinators or others. In some cases, disability co-ordinators were required to produce annual or bi-annual reports which would be passed through line managers to senior management.

Very few institutions had procedures set up specifically to monitor provision for students with disabilities. Most, however, had some form of general monitoring of their services in place. Some were doing this through other formal review exercises or general student feedback forms. Others indicated a range of monitoring procedures by officers of the institution or by committees or groups within the institution. Six of the nineteen institutions that responded indicated that monitoring procedures included some form of input from the students.

Segregation

Awareness was generally high amongst the staff interviewed of the risk of segregating students with disabilities by making alternative provision for them. Some staff expressed concern that provision for students with disabilities, such as separate examination rooms, was segregating students with disabilities from the rest of the student population. They were wary of allowing students to be assessed in different ways to others because they did not want to treat students differently. Some staff providing support to students with disabilities were aware that they were treading a fine line between providing enough support and patronising the student by providing too much. They did not wish to treat the student as if he or she was not capable of doing things alone.

Some disability co-ordinators were keen to argue that some practices that would benefit students with disabilities (such as providing copies of overheads and handouts in advance) would actually constitute better teaching and learning practice for all students. They felt it was better to argue for changes on this basis than to try to argue for 'extras' for a small number of students.

Having a disability co-ordinator assigned to supporting students with disabilities also had the effect of separating out a certain group of students and labelling them as different from others. All agreed however that this was necessary at the moment since institutions were a long way from the point where provision for students with disabilities was part of standard practice. One disability co-ordinator explained:

> *I suppose the way that we do look at it at the end of the day is that, you know, the university hasn't caught up yet in a way. All right, I'm here and I'm a particular person with a particular remit, but it's not because, you know, you're this special separate person it's because conditions aren't ideal yet.*

Admissions

The students taking part in this project had all got into higher education. There are some, however, for whom higher education is still inaccessible. Institutions assess applications on academic merit. However, when students are invited for pre-entry visits, disability co-ordinators are taking the line of offering a positive approach, but are being upfront with applicants about any access difficulties they may face. In some cases, crucial areas are not accessible (see the chapter on Access): this does put some potential students off.

Some disabled students are refused entry to certain courses by the institution because of health and safety, for example, in some lab-based subjects, where the

health and safety of a student could not be assured. On some courses other factors need to be considered before a student can be accepted, such as the General Teaching Council's Medical Regulations. These encourage students with disabilities to apply, but may mean that students have to have a medical assessment of fitness to become a teacher, before being accepted onto a course.

Access

All institutions still have areas of the physical environment that remain inaccessible. A large proportion indicated that parts of their teaching accommodation were inaccessible. This problem was usually overcome by timetabling classes including students with disabilities in accessible rooms. About half of the institutions described only partial or assisted access to the library and most described poor or partial access to sports and leisure facilities. All offered toilet facilities for people with disabilities, but these were sometimes limited in number, requiring students to travel long distances to use them. Most offered a small number of accessible or adapted residences.

Newly built accommodation generally offered better access than adaptations of existing buildings. Disabled people sometimes had to take circuitous routes in adapted buildings. Policies on health and safety which required heavy fire doors to remain closed conflicted with policies on access, as these doors created obstacles for disabled staff and students.

Staff education

Many interviewees agreed that there was a general need for staff development on disability. Staff needed to be better informed about policy developments, services available, and making appropriate referrals, as well as on how to work appropriately with students with different kinds of disability.

Many staff have a positive attitude towards working with students with disabilities but insufficient knowledge or experience to draw on. They need advice and information about how best to support students. One lecturer admitted to having felt uncomfortable and anxious about teaching a student with a visual impairment in the beginning because he had no previous experience to draw on. He was concerned about doing or saying something inappropriate. He was also unsure about what the student would need from him. He says he is now, with experience, much more relaxed about it:

> *I started off being rather embarrassed that I kept using the word look and see and all this kind of stuff when I realised that they couldn't, you know ... go and look in the library or something. But I've gone through that phase now and it seems you can be a bit too delicate about it really. And when I said to ... [one disabled student] something like 'Are you visually impaired?' ... she said no I'm totally blind, so I thought well, you know, so I didn't need to beat about the bush.*

Increasing numbers of students are identifying themselves to institutions as having dyslexia. This seems to be particularly acute in some departments and subject areas, such as art. Many staff are unsure how to deal with this. Some have expressed the need for more clear information to help them understand the effects

of dyslexia and clear guidelines on what they can do to support students. Fewer staff now question its existence, but many do not understand it enough to work appropriately with dyslexic students. One disability co-ordinator explained:

> *... a lot of staff are faced with students with dyslexia. And okay they can be told that the student has dyslexia, ignore the spelling and things like that, but they don't know what more to do. And I think, you know, there's a feeling that people would like to know more about it, more what they could do to help, what could be done to support it. So that's a big gap I think.*

Attendance at staff development events is usually voluntary, and given that staff have many pressures on their time, they usually only attend when they are required to teach a student with a disability. Training events that have taken place so far have not been well-attended. One disability co-ordinator is going to talk to departmental meetings because she realises that she is not getting through to the staff she needs to through training. Another is working his way around heads of department in order to make personal contact and inform them of current provision, for the same reason. Some institutions are incorporating disability awareness training into staff induction, which is a positive step forward. However, this will only reach new staff and there will still be large numbers of staff who have not received any training.

Several respondents indicated that a small number of staff in their institutions have an elitist attitude towards higher education. They tend to be older members of staff. They do not see why they should admit students to higher education who cannot meet the same criteria as everyone else. They tend to take a particularly dim view of dyslexia, since they equate reading and writing abilities with intellect. They cannot see why some students should be allowed to use spell-check packages and be granted extra time in exams. These members of staff would be unlikely to attend voluntary staff development events on disability. Disability co-ordinators and other members of staff try to tackle these people on their attitudes using persuasion and argument, but ultimately, institutions need policies that they can impose if necessary. One disability co-ordinator said that:

> *... we still have a few lecturers, some of them very senior lecturers, who don't believe that anybody with a disability has any place in the university. And somebody like that can undo in one afternoon three years hard work of explaining to people that disabled people, people with disabilities, special needs are just ordinary people it's just that a bit of them doesn't work as well. For so long I think, and I think government are very much to blame ... politicians see people with disabilities as a breed apart, something different, you know, they're not the same as us. They don't think 'oh well a wheelchair is just a mode of transport'.*

One disability co-ordinator has found that personal contact with a student with a disability can sometimes have a remarkable effect on even the most hardened of cynics amongst the staff. She describes how one particularly difficult member of staff who was vehemently against taking the needs of students with dyslexia into account was turned around by an encounter with a disabled student:

> *We have got a chap who was a terrible cynic, he was driving me insane, and he was converted instantly overnight in September this year. It was wonderful to watch. Not by a dyslexic student but by a student who is dying and who has got to the level where ... she had real difficulty getting through her exams, she passed two of them but one of them she failed so she was put to the ... board. And the ... board took the very paternalistic attitude which happens in ... [this*

university] more and more and more. People know best what's best for everybody else. And they said to her look, we think you should have a year off to concentrate on your health rather than your studies. And this amazing woman stood up and said look, I mean it's not traditional to speak at the ... board, usually they have a spokesman, but she just barged in in front of everybody and said ... 'You bunch of pompous asses, how dare you turn round and say that you know what's best for me. What the hell do you think's going to happen in the next year, you know, I'm going to get a cure? I'm dying, can you get this clear I am dying, and I want to get my degree before I die if I can. When I leave this university it's going to be in a pine box, okay boys, because that's the only way you're getting me out. And on this basis yes, sure, I might have difficulty getting through the next year, SAAS is paying you to have me for a year, I'm going to be here for a year, and I'm paying myself. You're getting the money to have the bum on seats, what's your problem with this. And at the end of the day stop thinking you know what's best and remember I wasn't expected to finish my primary school education and I'm now at university, just don't you start presuming'.

And she went berserk at them and I just sat back and thought well, she's doing a much better job than I could. And one of the academics on this ... board was the chap who was the complete cynic on dyslexia and very loud mouthed about it, and he was so impressed and so taken aback by this woman, and in fact ... the Dean just said in effect, you know, she's absolutely right. We have got absolutely no right, we're not doctors, we can't say medically what's best for her. So ... and that academic who was on the committee was so impressed by this girl that he actually came the next day ... and because he had been so aggressively against dyslexia in particular, it was dyslexia he wanted to find out more about because he said 'I think I've been bigoted'. And he came and he looked and he wanted all sorts of things but it was the other student who changed him. So he actually came in and wanted to find out more about it, and there's been changes in his department since he went back. Not I think because he's actively going out recruiting people to believe or anybody knows he's a convert, but because he's shut up his negative concepts and he's thinking about things more and more.

This disability co-ordinator now tends to get students with disabilities to take part in staff development events, to describe their experiences to members of staff.

Many interviewees said they felt that institutions and members of staff had learned a great deal from students with disabilities. Sometimes in very direct ways, such as by asking students to point out how buildings could be made more accessible to them or by asking students to give advice on proposed changes. However, they also felt that simply by getting their degrees students were showing people what was possible.

New technology

New technology in some cases was improving teaching and learning practice generally and benefiting students with disabilities as well. In some cases, notes and handouts were being made available over computer networks for all students. This required little extra effort on the part of the lecturer and constituted good practice for all students. Not all staff are computer literate, however, so this is not a solution in all cases. Some departments were making videos or audio tapes of lectures available so that any student could replay them later. Again this is good practice for all students and can be useful for students with disabilities. Not all departments have the resources to provide this kind of service however.

Discussion

All institutions are taking steps towards reviewing and improving their provision for students with disabilities. This has come at a time of increasing student numbers and tighter budgets in higher education. What institutions can achieve in this area will be constrained by financial limitations. There is a need for continued movement towards standardising provision throughout institutions, as there are currently disparities between what students can expect in different departments. The continued development of relevant policies and greater staff awareness and training would contribute significantly to this aim. While all institutions had taken steps towards offering equality of opportunity to students with disabilities across the board, they all had some way to go before realising this aim.

Influential members of staff

All agreed that the appointment of disability co-ordinators has had a positive impact on the process of improving provision for students with disabilities. What the co-ordinators could achieve in the post, however, was often constrained by increasing pressure on their time.

It was seen as a positive aim to spread knowledge, expertise and commitment to disability issues more widely throughout institutions. This was happening in several institutions in two main ways: through influential key figures and through networks of departmental disability contacts.

Disability Statements

Most disability co-ordinators said that the requirement to publish Disability Statements had raised the profile of disability issues amongst senior management.

Committees

Several institutions had set up committees to look at disability issues, which were contributing to policy development. Student input into this process was often being sought, either by consultation with student groups or by inviting students to sit on committees.

Monitoring

Very few institutions had procedures specifically set up to monitor provision for students with disabilities. However, provision was often being monitored as part of other evaluation exercises. About one third of institutions indicated that these exercises included some form of input from students.

Admissions

All institutions assess applications on academic merit. However, students with disabilities may be effectively excluded where key areas of buildings are not accessible, or because of health and safety policies.

Access

All institutions have areas of the physical environment that remain inaccessible. Adapting existing buildings can be costly and what institutions can achieve in this area is constrained by financial limitations.

Staff education

It was clear that there was a need for greater staff awareness of policy developments, services available, how to make appropriate referrals, and how to work appropriately with students with different kinds of disability. There is a particular need for information and guidance for staff on how to work appropriately with dyslexic students.

New technology

There is scope for new technology to improve teaching and learning practice generally in ways that would benefit all students, including those with disabilities.

11: Discussion and Conclusions

In this final chapter we present our conclusions from the study. This report has described in detail the experiences of twelve students with disabilities, learning difficulties, medical conditions or mental health difficulties in higher education. The students were from diverse backgrounds, studying different subjects. All of them had received some form of additional support during their time in higher education, but their particular needs varied greatly. The types of support that had been useful to them included IT packages; the DSA; information, advice and personal support from the disability co-ordinator and welfare staff; adapted accommodation; the provision of course handouts in alternative formats, or notes in advance of classes; and designated parking spaces. Some students described very good experiences in higher education, some described experiencing difficulties.

We accept that generalisations from the experiences of 12 students must be treated with caution. However, what this research does provide is an in-depth insight into what it is like at the moment to be a student with additional needs in higher education. The information gathered through the questionnaire to disability co-ordinators and during interviews with staff supplemented these insights and provided us with the basis for our more general conclusions about the current state of development of policy and provision for students with disabilities in higher education institutions.

Policies

We now present our conclusions and briefly discuss each one. Our first three conclusions are all concerned with the policies which the higher education institutions have in place.

Conclusion 1: Higher education institutions now have institutional policies on students with disabilities

All institutions have taken steps in recent years to move from a reactive, ad hoc response to the needs of individual students with disabilities, towards a more proactive, standardised approach backed up by policy and procedures. There is a very careful balance to be struck between individual responses to particular needs, which imply respect for the uniqueness of each student but may be unstructured and ineffective, and generalised policy-led approaches which set out rules and principles of fairness, but which can become bureaucratic and insensitive to the individual. Principles need to be stated, but individuals also need to be respected. Institutions have been moving towards being able to guarantee at least a minimum level of provision across departments.

Conclusion 2: Institutional policies on disability can sometimes conflict with other policies, such as anonymous marking or health and safety requirements

Many of the institutions were prepared to allow for some form of consideration to be given to the circumstances of the students when their essays, assignments or examination texts were being assessed. This necessitates the students' texts being

identified in some way. There is currently a great deal of discussion in higher education about the need for anonymous marking of texts to ensure fairness. There appears to be a tension between these two imperatives.

Similar conflict can occur between policies which dictate equality of access for all and health and safety requirements which can mean that access is effectively denied to some. We observed an instance of this when health and safety requirements meant that a set of doors had to be kept closed, making access for a wheelchair user difficult.

Conclusion 3: The ways in which policy implementation was monitored varied greatly between institutions

Ways of specifically monitoring policies and provision for students with disabilities which include student input need to be developed. It seems clear from this project that the voices of the students themselves need to be heard as it is only they who can effectively express the human impact of policy decisions made by institutions.

Advice and support

The next four conclusions are about various forms of advice and support for students.

Conclusion 4: Various forms of advice, guidance and support are now available to students with disabilities, but more could be done to make people aware of this

A greater insight is needed into why some people with disabilities who have the potential to enter higher education do not make it. The numbers of students with disabilities in higher education still do not reflect the estimates of the proportion of the population with disabilities. Admittedly these numbers are very difficult to establish accurately, and the changes in special needs provision in primary and secondary education may still not have made their full impact.

Steps are being taken towards dismantling the barriers that have existed for students with disabilities in higher education. Pre-entry procedures for students with disabilities are generally in place, as are procedures for granting alternative examination arrangements. Sources of support specifically for students with disabilities, such as disability co-ordinators and the DSA, are now available.

Conclusion 5: Recent initiatives have had a positive impact on the development of provision for students with disabilities

The appointment of disability co-ordinators has had a welcome and positive impact on the development of provision for students with disabilities. Their work has been particularly visible. The Disability Discrimination Act of 1995 required SHEFC to have regard to the requirements of disabled persons, and imposed on SHEFC a duty to require higher education institutions to publish Disability Statements containing specified information on their provision for disabled students. The

production of Disability Statements was regarded as a positive step and has at least raised awareness of gaps in provision amongst senior management. While most institutions state a commitment to equality of opportunity, they also acknowledge that they are a long way from realising this aim in all aspects of their provision.

Conclusion 6: The contribution made by the disability co-ordinators was praised by the students

All these are positive steps, and the disability co-ordinators, in particular, were greatly appreciated by all the students as having made a positive contribution to their experience. However, big gaps remain and improved support and guidance at transition points could be particularly helpful to students with disabilities, as it provides another point at which applicants could be informed of the services and facilities available to them in higher education.

Further guidance on the transition from higher education to employment would be helpful. Some of the students in the study had previous employment experience, or had sought part-time or temporary employment. They were well aware of the barriers they were likely to face and some were taking steps to overcome these barriers by making appropriate contacts and gaining relevant experience. However, they were not all positive about the prospects before them.

Conclusion 7: The present rules governing eligibility for the DSA disallow students who are only able to study part-time

The students were generally positive about the support they were receiving through the DSA. However, the present rules discriminate against students who are not in receipt of a maintenance grant or who are only able to study part-time. In light of the recent report on higher education by Dearing, and the gradual phasing out of grants, questions are raised about how eligibility for the DSA will be decided in the future.

Disclosure

Conclusion number eight is about what the students should tell their institutions about their disabilities.

Conclusion 8: There is still a great deal of uncertainty about disclosing disabilities in certain circumstances

The number of students disclosing disabilities to their institutions is increasing. However, some students still do not disclose because of fear of prejudice or discrimination, because they have no idea that they may be entitled to additional support or because they do not categorise themselves as disabled. Institutions often approach students who declare disabilities on application forms and invite them to discuss their needs. This is a crucial first step in communicating that the institution is taking a positive approach towards students with disabilities. However, institutions need to consider how to reach all students who may benefit from additional support with the message that support is available to them. Where a student's disability is not visible, it can be a real dilemma to decide whether to tell

others about it. Ultimately if a student chooses not to disclose or refuses the support on offer, then that choice must be respected. However, disclosure should be a positive option for all students.

Awareness and aspirations

The next three conclusions are about differences in provision and levels of awareness of disability issues in higher education institutions, and about the aspirations of the students for fairness and equality.

Conclusion 9: Students' academic experiences varied greatly between institutions and departments

Much of the variability in the academic experiences of the students was down to the responses of individual members of staff. Some staff were very knowledgeable and understanding, others much less so. Lack of understanding was particularly apparent in relation to dyslexia, ME and mental health difficulties, but even where staff were well-intentioned they could be unintentionally insensitive. The experiences of students can depend more on their contact with individual staff than on institutional or departmental factors.

Conclusion 10: Institutions could do more to raise awareness of disability issues amongst their staff and students

Staff awareness of institutional policy on disability and of how to support students with disabilities appropriately is very variable. At the moment, key people such as disability co-ordinators and members of staff who have some personal experience or knowledge of disability offer positive and appropriate provision for students. Lack of awareness amongst staff can have serious consequences for students. It can lead to unfair assessment and even failure. It can also cause discomfort and stress and put students into the difficult position where they feel their only recourse is to complain. This is not undertaken lightly and can cause some anxiety. Similarly, failures of internal communication can put students in the position of repeatedly having to ask for something, making them feel they are a nuisance for asking, rather than that they have a right to have their needs met. Attention needs to be paid to clarifying institutional policies and raising awareness amongst all staff of the institution, including academic, support and service staff, if institutional commitment to providing equality of opportunity is to be realised. Students' experiences do not depend entirely on staff. Institutions perhaps also need to clarify the extent of their responsibility to raise awareness of disability issues amongst non-disabled students.

Conclusion 11: Students with disabilities are looking for equal opportunities

Some students were allowed to tape lectures, were given notes in advance of classes, or were allowed extra time in examinations. Measures such as these were designed to allow them the same opportunities as other students. The students tended to resist strongly the idea of any provision which gave them an advantage or singled them out as being given undue consideration. There was some awareness

that 'special' provision for students with disabilities may actually segregate those students it is attempting to support from the rest of the student population. Students were willing to accept a degree of segregation where they felt it offered them equal opportunities in important aspects of their studies, such as taking exams in separate accommodation so that they could use computers or other equipment. The students were strongly against being advantaged in any way because of their disabilities, being segregated unnecessarily or having their disabilities advertised for no good reason.

Physical and social environment

Our final two conclusions concern the physical environment in higher education institutions and the non-academic lives of students.

Conclusion 12: Institutions have found ways of adapting the physical environment to improve access, but this is still sometimes less than ideal

Adapting the physical environment to become accessible is often a costly business and institutions can only commit themselves to making gradual changes, within the limitations of available resources. Where obstacles to access remain in the physical environment, institutions are usually only able to look for ways of getting round them at the moment, rather than removing them. Nevertheless, there remain buildings which are inaccessible, and others where access is difficult. Students with mobility difficulties are sometimes faced with extended journeys to get to the one 'accessible' entry.

There was some evidence that students were being effectively excluded from institutions at the admissions stage where key areas of the physical environment remained inaccessible to them.

Conclusion 13: Non-academic aspects of life in higher education are also important in ensuring that students are successful

Finance, social life and accommodation are all important aspects of a student's experience of higher education. Difficulties in these areas can lead to stress and even to students giving up their courses. Finance was a major worry to some of these students. This was compounded by the inability of some of them to earn extra money through part-time or vacation employment, an avenue open to their peers. Some of the students in this study were active participants in the social life of their institution, and some concentrated their interests elsewhere. However, some were effectively excluded, and others reported negative experiences.

Finally

Higher education institutions are all taking steps towards improving their provision for students with disabilities. True equality of opportunity, where provision for students with disabilities is no longer an add-on but is part of standard practice, is an ideal at the moment, but institutions are taking significant steps towards it. At this time of change, some students with disabilities are receiving appropriate and useful support. However, provision is very variable within institutions and

students cannot be assured of receiving appropriate support across the board. Institutional failures in this area can seriously disadvantage students. Policies are being developed at the moment and attention and resources will need to be diverted towards their successful implementation.

We have spent a great deal of time with the students in this study, talking to them about their experiences in higher education and accompanying them to their classes. We have interviewed their friends and their teachers. The table below is a 'wish list' which we have drawn up as a result of all of these observations and conversations. We acknowledge that there are some limitations on what can be done, but we hope that those in higher education who are in a position to promote change will heed what the students have told us, and continue to build upon the good practice which already exists in many places throughout Scotland.

Our final contribution is a list of points for higher education institutions to consider. These are listed under a number of policy areas: entry and admissions, physical access, teaching and learning, assessment, support, and monitoring.

Points for higher education institutions to consider

Policy area	**Consider how to:**
Entry and admissions	• Identify the barriers to access • Identify the needs of individuals • Inform applicants about facilities and support • Promote disclosure as a positive and beneficial option
Physical access	• Identify the limitations of existing buildings • Find out what can be done through simple measures • Dismantle existing barriers rather than simply finding ways around them
Teaching and Learning	• Promote good practice in teaching all students • Raise awareness of barriers created by inappropriate methods • Promote staff development in disability issues
Assessment	• Clarify ideas of 'fairness' in assessment • Promote equal opportunities for students to demonstrate ability
Support	*Pastoral* • Support the key role of the disability co-ordinator • Promote awareness of disability issues amongst staff • Promote good communications amongst relevant agencies and staff • Provide appropriate guidance pre-entry, during course, and pre-exit. *Finance* • Overcome the negative implications of the changing student finance system for students with disabilities *Technology* • Identify appropriate technology to support students • Provide training and maintenance appropriate to the technology
Monitoring	• Evaluate all aspects of provision • Provide for student input to monitoring procedures

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire for disability co-ordinators

Policy and provision for students with disabilities in higher education institutions

A questionnaire for disability co-ordinators/advisers

This questionnaire asks about current policy and provision for students with disabilities at your institution. It forms part of a project funded by the Scottish Office Education and Industry Department and supported by SHEFC, looking at the experiences of students with disabilities in higher education.

All responses will be treated in confidence and used for research purposes only. No institutions or individuals will be named in our final report without their prior consent. As explained in the accompanying letter, information may be passed in confidence to the University of Stirling evaluation team in order to avoid them approaching you separately for the same information.

We would be grateful if you would complete the questionnaire by **14 August 1996** and return it in the envelope provided.

If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact Teresa Tinklin or Dr John Hall at SCRE: 15 St John Street, Edinburgh EH8 8JR, telephone 0131-557 2944.

Thank you very much for your help.

Your name _____ Your position _____

Name of institution _____

A Your role as co-ordinator/adviser for students with disabilities

1 Please give a brief description of your role as co-ordinator/adviser for students with disabilities?

B Current policy and provision for students with disabilities

We would like to find out about current policy and provision for students with disabilities at your institution. Section C will ask about any plans you have to change your provision in the future.

2 Does your institution have a policy statement on disability?

Yes ☐ No ☐

It would help us with our research if you would send us copies of your **current** policy statement on disability (if the statement is in the process of being revised we would like the existing one) and any other policy documents relevant to students with disabilities. These would be treated in the strictest confidence by the research team and would be passed in confidence to the University of Stirling evaluation team in order to avoid them approaching you separately to ask for the same thing.

Copies of policy documents enclosed ☐

The following questions in this section ask about **current** provision for students with disabilities in your institution. If you feel the answer to any question is contained in the policy documents that you are sending us, please simply refer us to the relevant document.

3 What procedures are currently in place for dealing with students with disabilities when they are applying to the institution?

4 How would you describe the current level of access for wheelchair users to the following buildings? Where more than one building is involved please indicate the proportion that are currently accessible.

Teaching accommodation

Library

Toilets

Residences

Sports/leisure facilities

Refectory

Other buildings (please specify)

5 Please give details of any special equipment that you currently provide for students with disabilities.

6 Please describe any staff development on disability that has taken place, mentioning which groups of staff have been involved.

7 Please describe any advice and support that is available for students with disabilities, mentioning which members of staff are responsible for providing this.

8 Please describe information that is provided for students with disabilities by your institution, indicating when and where it is made available and what topics it covers.

9 Please describe any assistance offered by your institution to students with disabilities when they are seeking financial support.

10 Please describe any other provision made for students with disabilities by your institution.

C Future changes to provision for students with disabilities

11 Please describe any plans for future changes that will affect provision for students with disabilities.

D Evaluating provision

12 Please describe any systems that are in place for evaluating what is currently provided by your institution for students with disabilities.

E Defining disability

13 How is disability defined by your institution?

14 Does your institution's definition of disability include each of the following categories?

	Yes	No
dyslexia	☐	☐
hearing impairment/deafness	☐	☐
visual impairment/blindness	☐	☐
mobility impairment	☐	☐
mental health difficulties (eg depression, schizophrenia, phobias)	☐	☐
chronic medical conditions (eg epilepsy, diabetes, ME, asthma)	☐	☐
multiple disabilities	☐	☐
other (please specify)		

15 Can you give us an indication of how many currently enrolled students there are in each of the following categories in your institution (in the academic year 1995-1996)?

Number of students with:

dyslexia	
hearing impairment/deafness	
visual impairment/blindness	
mobility impairment	
mental health difficulties (eg depression, schizophrenia, phobias)	
chronic medical conditions (eg epilepsy, diabetes, ME, asthma)	
multiple disabilities	
other (as specified in question 14)	

16 What is the total number of students at your institution? ☐

F The next stage of the project

The next stage of the project involves us working closely with a small number of volunteer students with disabilities. We hope to shadow each student for one day in the normal course of their studies, then the following day interview them in depth about their experiences of higher education. At this stage we would also like to interview other key individuals in the institution. A few months later we will interview the students

again in order to find out about their experiences in the intervening period. The purpose of this part of the research is to produce detailed accounts of their experiences in higher education, in order to develop a list of key issues for policy-makers to address and to assess the extent to which current practice, as perceived by the students themselves, is in line with policy.

Students would initially be approached and informed of the project and asked if they would be willing to take part if invited to do so.

17 Would you be willing to help us further by assisting us in the selection of students?

Yes ☐ No ☐

If you are willing to help us further we will contact you by telephone in order to answer any queries you may have and to discuss how best to contact appropriate students.

Your telephone number _____

G Other comments

18 Are there any other comments you would like to make on your institution's provision for students with disabilities or on the project in general?

Thank you very much for completing the questionnaire. Please return it in the envelope provided.

Appendix 2: Shadowing

Shadowing students proved to be a very useful way of finding out about their everyday experiences. It also, however, raised questions about the boundaries of my role as researcher.

Benefits of shadowing

Shadowing proved to be very useful in several ways. It allowed me to see for myself some things which students may not necessarily have told me about because that was their everyday experience. It was useful with all students, but particularly so with students with mobility difficulties, as I could see the physical obstacles that they came up against every day. It aided communication in the interviews, because we would sometimes discuss things that had happened during the day. Shadowing allowed myself and the student to get to know each other a bit before the in-depth interviews, which might have otherwise seemed quite formal. Students would also spontaneously share things with me during the day that they felt I should know about.

Impact on the day

I was aiming to observe a fairly 'average' day, however, I accepted that it was impossible that my presence would have no impact on that day. It felt unnatural and unhelpful to attempt to behave like a 'fly on the wall', silently observing and never participating. I acted naturally with the students, but did try to keep the impact of my presence on the day to a minimum. Some students wanted to show me different aspects of their institutions and this was invariably helpful, but I did encourage students, as far as possible, to do the things they would normally do during the day. Also I tried to take a fairly low-key role in lectures and tutorials, quietly taking notes, listening and watching. It was obviously easier to be inconspicuous in lectures than in tutorials.

While the impact of my presence will have affected the day in many subtle ways, on a small number of occasions, the effects were more obvious. A small number of staff seemed to pay more attention to the student I was with than to others in the class and I suspected this was because of my presence. On one occasion my presence acted as a catalyst for a member of staff to ask a student about his disability for the first time and to check that his needs were being met.

How lecturers reacted

Staff were informed beforehand of my visit and their approval was sought. All agreed. Most discreetly acknowledged me in some way when I entered the room, then carried on without drawing further attention to my presence. Some invited me to address the class, which I did. But I tried to avoid this as it seemed to draw unnecessary attention to the student I was with. I checked with the students at the start of the day how they felt about me telling people what I was doing and all of them said that that would be OK.

Some staff were uncertain about how to behave towards me during lessons and with hindsight it would have been helpful if I had been clearer about this at the outset. Some intermittently checked with me whether I needed anything from them, or wanted to discuss the project while the class were busy, both of which were fine. Several invited me to join discussions in tutorials, which I tended not to do as it conflicted with my role as observer. Some had misunderstood the reason for my presence and thought I was carrying out assessments of them. Fortunately, I was usually able to clear this up fairly quickly.

Intervention

My role was primarily to research, to find out about the students' experiences. However, on occasion I found myself in a position where I might intervene. This posed a dilemma. When it was clear that a student did not have certain information that might actually be helpful to them, I chose to give them that information. Some staff asked me for feedback or information about the students and this raised questions about the boundaries of my role. Should I tell them where a specific student's needs were not being met? Should I stand back and leave it up to students and staff to communicate with each other? These are questions which need to be considered when undertaking research of this kind.

Observing and being observed are both unusual roles in many ways, which can be, at times, uncomfortable, although the students in the project seemed to be fairly comfortable with the exercise. For the purposes of this project, however, shadowing was undoubtedly an invaluable part of the methodology.

Appendix 3: Participating students

Name	Year of study	Course	Disability	School leaver/ Returner
Andrew	3	Art degree - ceramics	Central vision blindness	R
Catherine	2	Publishing	Mild CP affecting speech, fine motor skills and balance	S
Gary	1 Postgraduate	IT support	Chronic back de-generation and clinical depression	R
Jim	3	History	Visual impairment	S
Katy	3	Accountancy and finance	ME	R
Lillian	2	Sociology and social policy	Cerebral palsy affecting mobility, balance and co-ordination	R
Lisa	3	Primary education	Dyslexia	S
Mark	2	Business computing	Cerebral dyplegia affecting flexibility and strength in legs	S
Mike	2	Computer science	Visual impairment	S
Richard	2	Philosophy and art history	Dyslexia	R
Sandra	3	English literature	Speech deaf	R
Zoë	4	Biomedical sciences	Dyslexia	S

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